Gay Comics and Queer Male Alternative Comics in America
History, Conventions, and Challenges

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Abstract

This thesis is focused on American gay male comics and queer alternative comics. I argue that the field of gay male comics production is dominated by two key genres: gay porno comics and gay ghetto comics. The conventions and characteristics of these genres help to construct and reinforce a dominant gay male habitus that is both sexual and social. Drawing on interviews as well as close readings of a number of case studies, I discuss the ways in which alternative queer cartoonists respond to the conventions of these genres, and create alternative representations of gay identity, community, and sex. I argue ultimately that the field of gay male comics production is not entirely homogenous, and that the queer male alternative comics that appear from roughly 1990 onwards are distinctive. The gay male comics of the First Wave (from the 1970s to 1990) are concerned with constructing and consolidating a sense of gay identity and community as relatively unified and stable. While sometimes critical of gay culture, as a whole they ultimately affirm the ideal of a unified gay community. In contrast, the queer male alternative comics that emerged as part of the Second Wave (starting around 1990) are far more concerned with questioning the normative, dominant values of mainstream gay culture, and challenging the identities, tastes and practices associated with the dominant gay habitus. Nevertheless because the gay ghetto and gay porno genres have been so dominant, queer alternative cartoonists position themselves in various different relationships to one or other genre. While some do abandon the genre conventions of gay porno and gay ghetto comics, more often queer alternative cartoonists take up some of these genre conventions and adapt, challenge, or subvert them in subtle ways.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is focused on American gay male comic strips and cartoons[1] - that is, comics and cartoons which are produced by self-identified gay and bisexual male cartoonists, aimed primarily at a gay readership, which deal with gay identity and experience as their subject matter, and are published in the United States of America. It explores the history of gay male comics, which goes back to the early 1960s, and focuses on a subset of gay male comics, which I term

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[1] Comics scholars have wrangled over the definitions of terms such as "comics," "comic strips," and "cartoons." Prominent scholarly definitions include those of Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, and Robert C. Harvey. Eisner describes what he calls "sequential art" as "the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" – see Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Expanded ed. (1985; Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1990), 5. Scott McCloud defines both "sequential art" and "comics" as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" – see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 9. Harvey defines comics as "pictorial narratives or expositions in which words (often lettered into the picture area within speech balloons) usually contribute to the meaning of the pictures and vice versa" – see Robert C. Harvey, "Comedy at the Juncture of Word and Image," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, ed. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 76. McCloud's definition of comics de-emphasizes the verbal, and excludes single-panel cartoons from the category "comics." Harvey on the other hand emphasizes the importance of words, and sees cartoons as a connected art-form. For a critique of comics scholars' emphasis on definitions and origins see Samuel R. Delany, "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism" in his *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 218-270. This thesis sees comic strips and cartoons as separate but related mediums. I follow Martin Barker's more social definition of comics: "*a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a 'comic'*" – see Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 8. This thesis sees comic strips and cartoons as separate but related mediums – certainly many of the artists I discuss in this thesis have produced both sequential narratives and single-panel cartoons. I follow Martin Barker's more social understanding of comics: "*a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a 'comic.'* There has been a historical process whereby public arguments about comics, and what is acceptable under that name, have become in their turn powerful arguments about what is produced." See Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 8. Similarly, Josef Witek observes that "'comicsness' might usefully be reconceptualised from being an immutable attricute of texts to being considered as a historically contingent and evolving set of reading protocols that are applied to texts, that to be a comic means to be read as a comic" – see Josef Witek, "The Arrow and the Grid," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson, MS: University press of Mississippi), 149.

"queer male alternative comics," that emerged in the 1990s. I argue these "queer male alternative comics" are distinctive, partly in terms of subject matter and style, and partly because of their means of production. They are either self-published, or released by small independent comics publishers, and tend to cast a critical eye on aspects of gay male culture, as much as they are critical of the homophobia of the heterosexual world.

While various histories of gay art, literature, cinema, and so on have been written, there has been little academic work on gay (and lesbian) comics, with most such historical accounts having come from fan-historians, most of whom have also been comics artists themselves. Therefore, the first aim of this project is to provide a history of American gay comics and cartoons that shows the connections between changes in American gay/lesbian social and political life, as well as developments in the fields of gay media and of comic books, and the kinds of comics narratives and representations being produced by gay cartoonists aimed at gay readers in America at different times.

In this chapter, I argue that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) comics production constitutes what Pierre Bourdieu calls a "field of cultural production"; queer male alternative comics can be seen as a subfield of this broader field. I will explain Bourdieu's notion of fields further, and sketch out how the field of "queer male alternative comics" can be demarcated. I argue that the field is defined partly in terms of authorship – these are comics by creators who identify as queer, gay, and/or bisexual men; partly in terms of the subject matter of the comics – they deal with queer identity and experiences; and partly by its conditions of production – these are "alternative" comics in that they are published independently rather than by mainstream publishers, whether via self-publishing or through small independent publishers. In Chapter Two, I provide a Literature Review, showing that, while there have been many extensive scholarly works on a variety of different forms of gay cultural production, there is a significant gap in the study of gay male comics, which my thesis aims to fill.

The first core chapter of this study – Chapter Three – provides a history of gay American comics, and argues that the field quickly became dominated by two main genres: gay porno comics – explicit erotic narratives showing gay

male sex; and gay ghetto comics – often humorous stories focused on groups of gay friends living in gay urban enclaves. I argue that the narratives and representations found within the gay porno and gay ghetto comics construct a particular kind of gay male identity – a dominant gay habitus – as visible and "typical," naturalizing certain (culturally and historically specific) gay scenes and lifestyles as exemplary of "what the gay community is *really* like," and excluding other kinds of gay male identities. Chapter Four provides a more in-depth discussion of the codes and conventions of the gay porno and gay ghetto comics.

While it may be tempting to classify all gay/lesbian comics produced by gay/lesbian artists as "alternative" or "resistant" because of the fact of their existence in a heterocentric and homophobic culture, I argue that, in fact, there is a "gay mainstream," or what I have called, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu[2] and Katherine Sender,[3] a "dominant gay habitus." The comics I focus on in Chapters Five, Six and Seven of this study tend to define themselves against this dominant gay habitus as much as they do against "heterosexual" mainstream culture. I argue that these comics respond to the conventions of the gay ghetto and gay porno comics – sketched in Chapter Four – in a number of different ways, creating a range of alternative representations and narratives focused on queer male characters, and aiming to diversify and broaden the kinds of representations circulating within gay/queer male culture.

The Subfield of Queer Male Alternative Comics and Cartoons

I will now discuss Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields further, and show how "LGBT comics" and "queer male alternative comics" can be understood as fields in the Bourdieusian sense. I will demonstrate the breadth of the LGBT comics field and begin to demarcate the borders of the subfield of queer male alternative comics production. This latter field is defined in terms of its

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[2] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
[3] Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University press, 2004).

authorship, means of production, and subject matter, and the remainder of the chapter will discuss these aspects of the definition in more detail.

Pierre Bourdieu understands the social world as composed of multiple fields, such as politics, economics, religion, cultural production.[4] These large fields can be divided into subfields. For example, media production can be divided into television, film, magazines, comics, and so on. Bourdieu's concept of the field provides a spatial metaphor through which to consider areas of artistic and social practice, including the field of comics production, and the field of gay cultural practice (which incorporates the field of gay media production).

"Queer alternative comics" emerged in the 1990s and can be considered as a subfield of a broader field: LGBT comics production, which began to emerge in the 1960s and coalesced as a field in the late 1970s. Of course, the field of LGBT comics itself can be seen as a subfield of two broader, overlapping fields: the field of comics production more generally, and the field of gay media production. There are strong connections between the field of LGBT comics and the subfield of alternative queer comics. However, I argue that the queer comics that appear from roughly 1990 onwards are distinctive.

"LGBT comics" are those comics produced by creators who self-identify variously as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer, and whose work is largely concerned with LGBT identity and sexuality. The style and subject matter of LGBT comics vary widely, ranging from lesbian soap operas like Alison Bechdel's successful newspaper strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*,[5] to the lesser-known, self-published autobiographical comics of Carrie McNinch,[6] and from the unpolished, highly personal stories in Robert Kirby's anthology *Boy Trouble*,[7] to the glossy, commercial erotica published by Class Comics.[8] "Queer

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[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).
[5] *Dykes to Watch Out For* has been collected in numerous volumes, see for example Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch out For* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).
[6] Carrie McNinch, *You Don't Get There From Here* no. 1-30 (Los Angeles, CA: August 2008-September 2014, ongoing).
[7] Robert Kirby, ed., *Boy Trouble* no. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Self-published, 1994); Robert Kirby and David Kelly, eds., *Boy Trouble* no. 2-5 (Seattle, WA: DK Press, Summer 1995-2004); Robert Kirby and David Kelly, eds., *The Book of Boy Trouble* (San Francisco, CA: Green Candy Press, 2006);

alternative comics" refers to a smaller subset of the broad spectrum of LGBT comics. Like LGBT comics generally, queer alternative comics are produced by creators who identify as LGBT and/or queer, and have queer identity subject matter. However, they are distinct from the broader field of LGBT comics, partly because of authorship, partly in terms of subject matter and style, and partly because of their means of production.

This thesis emerges from my own involvement with LGBT/queer comics: I am a comics artist/writer, as well as an academic. Comics subcultures and LGBT subcultures have had to struggle to preserve their histories. As Judith Halberstam points out, queer cultural producers, and not just academics, have played an important role in the work of queer archiving, in "constructing queer genealogies and memories."[9] Indeed, when it comes to queer subcultures, the boundaries between producer, theorist and audience become increasingly blurred and permeable.[10] Judith Halberstam discusses the archive as "not simply a repository," but also "a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity."[11] The present study, then, aims to contribute to this process by writing a history of gay and lesbian comics, focusing especially on queer male cartoons and comic strips, many of them self-published and therefore ephemeral, in danger of being occluded and forgotten.

My position as a queer cartoonist has facilitated the process of interviewing the producers of queer comics; my experiences of self-publishing comics positioned me as an "insider" within those groupings. My reputation within the queer comics scene also furnished me with a degree of "authenticity" and, what Sarah Thornton has termed, "subcultural capital."[12] This has had a practical value for gaining access to respondents – some whom I knew

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Robert Kirby and David Kelly, eds., *The Book of Boy Trouble, Vol. 2* (San Francisco, CA: Green Candy Press, 2008).

[8] Patrick Fillion's Class Comics Inc. produce a range of erotic comics in both print and digital formats – see www.classcomics.com.

[9] Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 170.

[10] Ibid., 161.

[11] Ibid., 161–162.

[12] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 11–14.

personally, and some by reputation – and almost all of whom have been generous with their time and resources.

I will now turn to a discussion of queer authorship – one of the three defining features of "queer alternative comics" - followed by a discussion of the other two defining characteristics – alternative means of production, and alternative subject matter.

Queer Authorship

This section considers queer authorship. While I reject the notion that there is an "authentic" gay or queer identity, I nevertheless contend that the authorship of queer comics is important because of the author's access to queer subcultural discourses.

Edward H. Sewell, Jr.'s essay "Queer Characters in Comic Strips" is one of the few academic texts dealing with LGBT comics.[13] In it, Sewell draws a sharp distinction between the gay characters that appear in the comic strips produced by heterosexual creators and published in newspapers aimed primarily at heterosexual readers – such as Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* – and those that appear in publications targeted specifically at queer readers.[14] According to Sewell, queer characters in comic strips by heterosexual cartoonists cannot be "authentic," whereas in the comic strips produced by LGBT cartoonists and aimed primarily at LGBT readers, queer characters are, and indeed "should be," presented "in a context that permits a sense of being unique and 'other' from dominant heterosexual culture."[15] Sewell contends that "queers need their own 'space' in which they can acknowledge their own values, be authentic, and be powerful as individuals."[16] This assertion is problematic because of the assumptions it makes about the "own values" that all "queers" (as opposed to "all heterosexuals") supposedly must acknowledge, and about what constitutes

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[13] Edward H. Sewell, Jr., "Queer Characters in Comic Strips," in *Comics & Ideology*, ed. Matthew McAllister, et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 251–274.
[14] Ibid., 253.
[15] Ibid., 253.
[16] Ibid.

an "authentic" queer identity or way of life. Nevertheless, I agree with Sewell that the sexual identity of the author of a cultural text is important – the present project, after all, focuses on comics by creators who identify as gay or queer, and who openly embrace LGBT subject matter. However, this is not to imply that lesbian/gay comics by lesbian/gay creators are, to quote Richard Dyer, "the untrammelled embodiment of an authentic homosexual experience stripped of social contamination."[17] Like all forms of cultural production, LGBT comics by queer-identified creators "exist only in and through the confluence of ways of making sense, the terms of thought and feeling, available to them."[18]

Dyer rejects models of authorship that see the author as the ultimate source of meaning of a cultural text divorced from the industrial circumstances and semiotic codes within which a text is made. He also rejects understandings of homosexual identity which assume that "being lesbian/gay automatically gives one a particular way of looking at the world and expressing that," irrespective of cultural and historical context.[19] However, Dyer argues that it is important to hang on to a model of authorship – and of lesbian/gay identity – as kinds of *performance*, "something we all do but only with the terms, the discourses, available to us, and whose relationship to any imputed self doing the performing cannot be taken as read."[20] It still matters who specifically authors a cultural text but this is not all-determining: "What is significant is the authors' material social position in relation to discourse, the access to discourses they have on account of who they are."[21] For Dyer's purposes – and for my own – what matters is an author's access to queer subcultural discourses:

> [B]ecause filmmakers were lesbian or gay, they could produce lesbian/gay representations that could themselves be considered

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[17] Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, Second Edition (1990; London: Routledge, 2003), 1.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Richard Dyer, "Believing in Fairies," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 187.
[20] Ibid., 188.
[21] Ibid.

> lesbian/gay, not because all lesbians or gay men inevitably express themselves on film in a certain way, but because they had access to, and an inwardness with, lesbian/gay sign systems that would have been like foreign languages to straight filmmakers.[22]

The same could be said of LGBT comics writers and artists. With these qualifications, I accept Sewell's contention that the sexual identity of comics authors matters. However, Sewell's analysis lacks a consideration of the differences *within* LGBT culture, or an acknowledgement that the LGBT cultural field is itself riven with divisions and struggles between more dominant and more subordinated groups. An awareness of such differences and conflicts is centrally important to the present study and informs my decision to try to distinguish between a distinct subfield – "queer alternative comics" – and the broader field of LGBT comics.

Further, the present study focuses specifically on those comics by gay or bisexual men. It does not focus on lesbian or queer female cartoonists, or indeed transgender comics. This is because, despite queer theory's questioning of gender boundaries – exemplified so strongly by Judith Butler's seminal *Gender Trouble*[23] – differences in gendered experience mean that gay male and lesbian identities and experiences are not simply "the same." I will make reference to queer female cartoonists where relevant, but to attempt a detailed study of the field which explored queer female and male comics equally would do justice to neither.

Furthermore, the cartoonists this thesis focuses on are all working in the English language. The vast majority are North American, some Canadian, but mostly from the United States. The UK-based LGBT cartoonists are not as numerous as the US-based cartoonists, nor have they – for the most part – produced as *much* work as *consistently* as the American cartoonists. However, there are certainly links between the British and the American LGBT cartooning

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Revised ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

scenes, with American comics editors publishing work by British cartoonists and vice versa.[24] Again, I will also discuss or make reference to UK-based LGBT comics when relevant.

Alternative Means of Production and Subject Matter

As detailed above, I am defining the subfield of queer male alternative comics partly in terms of its authorship, partly in terms of subject matter, and partly by its conditions of production. In the previous section I discussed the question of authorship; I will now discuss production, and then subject matter. In this section I argue that queer alternative comics are "alternative" in two senses. First, they are part of the broad genre known as "alternative comics," and tend to either be self-published or published by small independent presses rather than by mainstream comics publishers. Second, queer alternative comics are "alternative" to the media produced by the *gay* "mainstream." Media produced from within the gay mainstream tends to construct and reinforce a limited range of gay identities, lifestyles, practices and values as "typical" of "what the gay community is *really* like." In contrast, I argue, queer alternative comics question and challenge many of these normative notions about gay identity, community, and sex.

By contrasting themselves both with mainstream comics and with the gay mainstream, queer artists, writers, editors and publishers become players in two broad fields of cultural activity: the field of comics production, and the field of LGBT media production. Comics fans, creators and scholars tend to distinguish between two broad genres of comics – "mainstream" and "alternative." "Mainstream comics," as Matthew Pustz describes, include "either those published by Marvel and DC (the two largest publishers in the 1990s) or by smaller companies that mimic the themes and topics of the big two's

[24] For example, I was publishing my own series *BoyCrazyBoy* in the UK while also doing stories that were published in Robert Kirby's US anthology *Boy Trouble*; I have been the only British contributor to the anthology from 1994 to the present.

products," which are dominated by superheroes.[25] The term "alternative comics" is often used to refer to everything else; indeed, alternative comics often define themselves in opposition to their mainstream counterparts. "Although it is hard to generalize," as Pustz describes,

> Most alternative comics tell stories that are more aimed at adults: these publications deal with real situations, realistic characters, and realistic emotions. Most are in black and white and come more directly out of the creators' personal visions. These comics are usually produced by a single person who has total control over what happens to the character. Because of this freedom, alternative comics can be very political. They also include much more diversity of content than one would find in the mainstream. Alternative comics can be realistic fiction, fantasy-based fables, autobiography, political journalism, graphic essays, comedy, cultural criticism, or anthologies featuring a combination of all these genres.[26]

The "alternative" label implies comics which are produced with a great deal of autonomy; they are usually self-published by their creator, or released by small independent publishers. Furthermore, they take a more or less oppositional attitude to culture and society, whether "straight" or "gay," and tend to feature political and autobiographical elements less regularly seen in Marvel and DC's products.

As with alternative comics in general, queer alternative comic strips have been published in a variety of formats, including minicomics photocopied and stapled by the creator him/herself, comic books put out by small independent publishers, and in collections and anthologies dedicated to alternative comics. Although queer comics creators have sometimes been excluded from general alternative comics, at other times they have been

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[25] Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 10.
[26] Ibid., 10–12.

included alongside heterosexual creators. For example, the feminist alternative comics anthology *Wimmen's Comix*[27] regularly featured comic strips by women who identified as lesbian or bisexual – such as Alison Bechdel, Lee Marrs, and Roberta Gregory – alongside women who did not.

Therefore, alternative LGBT comic strips cannot be considered as *solely* a small part of LGBT media – they are very much a part of the broad field of comics. But they are also a part of the field of LGBT media production. LGBT-themed comic strips have appeared in both local and national LGBT-interest newspapers and magazines since the early 1960s; they have also appeared in self-published queer zines predominantly *not* devoted to comics. In other words, the field of "LGBT comics" is a subfield of these two broader fields: the field of comics, and the field of LGBT media production.

According to Bourdieu, actors in each field struggle over the definition of the field, producing competing discourses and definitions, and vie for access to specific resources or stakes. Field theory is by definition relational; indeed, Bourdieu claimed that the concept fosters a "relational and analogical mode of reasoning."[28] Rather than considering comics production as an institution or a unified profession, or seeing it split simplistically between "the mainstream" (Marvel and DC) and "the alternatives" (every other publisher), field theory encourages us to see it as a much more multifaceted series of practices, divided in a complex number of ways.

Bourdieu argues that within each field, an ongoing battle is waged between two types of power, or capital – that is, economic and cultural capital – and he regards cultural fields as fluid and dynamic rather than static:

> The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically .

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[27] Wimmen's Comix Collective, eds., *Wimmen's Comix* no. 1-10 (San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp, November 1972-October 1985); *Wimmen's Comix* no. 11-13 (Long Beach, CA: Renegade Press, April 1987-1988); *Wimmen's Comix* no. 14-16 and *Wimmin's Comix* no. 17 (Auburn, CA: Rip Off Press, 1989-1992).
[28] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 75.

> . . and the autonomous principle (e.g. art for art's sake), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital [that is, recognition] tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy . . .[29]

This fundamental division – between the heteronomous and the autonomous principle, between economic capital and cultural capital – is at work within all cultural fields. This idea of the two principles refers to an axis between the two poles of heteronomy and autonomy. Parts of the field closest to the heteronomous pole are bound up with other fields and express their values: they are subject to the influence of politics and the economy and engaged in large-scale cultural production for mass audiences, with the aim of achieving commercial success. In the field of comics, for example, DC and Marvel – "mainstream comics" publishers – can be placed squarely on the heteronomous pole.

As Matthew Pustz describes, mainstream comics "tell whatever kind of story, whatever genre, will sell the best (or that publishers think will sell the best) at any given time."[30] Since the early 1960s, the mainstream comics industry has been dominated by the superhero genre. Mainstream comics are typically produced in an assembly-line process by a team operating on tight deadlines – a separate writer, penciler, inker, letterer, and colourist.[31] Both the content of mainstream comics and the characters featured therein are corporately owned: "Superman's copyright, for instance, is owned by DC Comics and its parent company, Time Warner, not by the men who created him."[32]

Bourdieu states that the parts of any given field closest to the autonomous pole are more independent and operate according to the rules and principles of the field itself. As such, they are less affected by the laws of economic profit: "the more autonomous it is, i.e. the more completely it fulfils its own logic as a field, the more it tends to suspend or reverse the dominant

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[29] Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production,* 40.
[30] Pustz, *Comic Book Culture,* 10.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

principle of hierarchization."[33] Those publications usually referred to as "alternative comics" are closer to the autonomous pole of the field. Generally speaking, alternative comics have appeared since about 1980, and "trace their origins to the underground 'comix' movement of the 1960s and 1970s,"[34] and in many ways can be seen as an extension of the underground culture.

In contrast with the working practices of mainstream comics publishers, alternative comics are often written and drawn by a single creator, who retains ownership of the characters and the work and "has total control over what happens to the characters."[35] "Alternative" comics are often published in relatively small numbers and when they are deemed ready by that author, with comparatively little regard for regular distribution schedules. The broad "alternative comics" label includes both those comics self-published, photocopied and stapled by the creator ("minicomics"), and those professionally printed by small independent comics publishers, such as Fantagraphics and Drawn & Quarterly. As Robert C. Harvey describes, the blossoming of alternative comics has allowed "creators . . . to follow their own private passions as storytellers and artists rather than obeying the dictates of conglomerate committees or corporate editors."[36]

"Mainstream comics" and "alternative comics" are often described by fans and creators as if they are completely separate entities. However, each field is subject to both autonomous and heteronomous pressures, and it is even possible to see both poles at work within one organisation. So, a writer working for Marvel or DC might act with relative autonomy, creating an openly gay character, as John Byrne did in 1983, creating Marvel Comics' first major gay character, the superhero Northstar, in the comic book series *Alpha Flight*.[37] However, such characters are usually owned by the company rather than the creator, and how the character is utilized ultimately depends on the decisions of

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[33] Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 38–39.
[34] Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), ix.
[35] Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 12.
[36] Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 248.
[37] Howard Stangroom, "The Comic Book Closet", *Comics Forum* no. 26 (Summer 2003), 47.

editors and publishers. In the 1980s, because of Marvel's editorial policy, Byrne could only hint at Northstar's sexuality discreetly[38] but in 1992, *Alpha Flight*'s then-writer, Scott Lobdell, was given permission to have Northstar "come out"[39] and in 2012, *Astonishing X-Men* no. 51 was devoted to the first gay male marriage in mainstream comics, between Northstar and his boyfriend, Kyle Jinadu. However, because Northstar is a character owned by the squarely heteronomous Marvel Comics, what individual writers are able to do with the character ultimately depends on what happens in the fields of economics and politics. If, in future, Marvel Comics sees it as financially disadvantageous to refer to Northstar's sexuality directly, writers will presumably be discouraged from doing so once again.

Smaller "alternative comics" companies like Fantagraphics and Drawn & Quarterly allow their writers and artists much greater freedom in terms of subject matter. However, they are still under heteronomous pressures – the economic need to secure advertising revenue for example. Those comics creators engaged in self-publishing are perhaps closest to the autonomous pole of the field, but even they may still experience heteronomous pressures. They are not totally sealed off from the economic world, as without suppliers of paper, ink and reproduction technologies their comics could not be created or disseminated in some form.

The broad field of LGBT media production, then, can also be divided between more heteronomous ("mainstream") and more autonomous publications. Within the field of LGBT media, national magazines like *The Advocate* and *Out* of course sit close to the heteronomous pole, and are ultimately motivated by economic capital or "the bottom line." Smaller LGBT publishers, such as Alyson Books and Winston Leyland Publications, lie somewhere in between the heteronomous and autonomous poles. Individuals and collectives engaged in self-publishing – for example, politically radical queer zines – can be placed at the autonomous end of the field of LGBT media.

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38 John Byrne, "Frequently Asked Questions: Was NorthStar always intended to be a gay character?," www.byrnerobotics.com, accessed 19th June 2014.
39 Emmett Furey, "Homosexuality in Comics – Part II," www.comicbookresources.com, accessed 19th June 2014.

Queer alternative comic strips tend to be published with relative autonomy in contrast with "mainstream" comics more generally. They are alternative in the sense that their means of publication gives them more freedom. They can actually talk openly about LGBT issues, and characters are owned by creators, who therefore have a lot of freedom with what they do with them. Queer alternative comics are also published with relative autonomy in contrast with much of the LGBT media. However, sometimes they are published within or as part of less autonomous, more heteronomous LGBT magazines and newspapers, and in some cases this has meant that queer cartoonists have found their work censored. For example, national gay lifestyle magazine *Instinct* insisted that Robert Kirby redraw a panel of one of his *Curbside* comics (published in the magazine), in which a man is receiving a blow-job, to make it less obvious and more discrete (See **Fig. 1-1** and **1-2**).[40]

As well as being "alternative" in the sense of being autonomous and independently published, part of the broad field of "alternative comics" rather than "mainstream comics," queer alternative comics may also be distinguished as alternative to the media produced by the gay "mainstream." The term "gay mainstream" can be considered, following Bourdieu, as referring to the dominant field of gay cultural and social practice; its media products can be understood as examples of the discourses that serve to legitimize the field of gay culture's dominant values and practices. For Bourdieu, discourses are specific to fields, originating within them and helping to shape the meanings of the field. The ultimate objective of such field-specific discourse, then, is the "recognition of legitimacy through the misrecognition of arbitrariness"[41] – to legitimize and naturalize what is arbitrary and culturally and historically specific. Foucault uses the term "discourse" in a similar way, to refer to "the general domain of all statements."[42] Discourse is made up of a variety of verbal and visual statements and utterances through which human values are communicated, reproduced and "naturalized," or made to seem "normal."

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[40] Robert Kirby, "Gangs of New York" (*Curbside*), *Instinct* no. 55 (November 2003), 76.
[41] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 168.
[42] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 80.

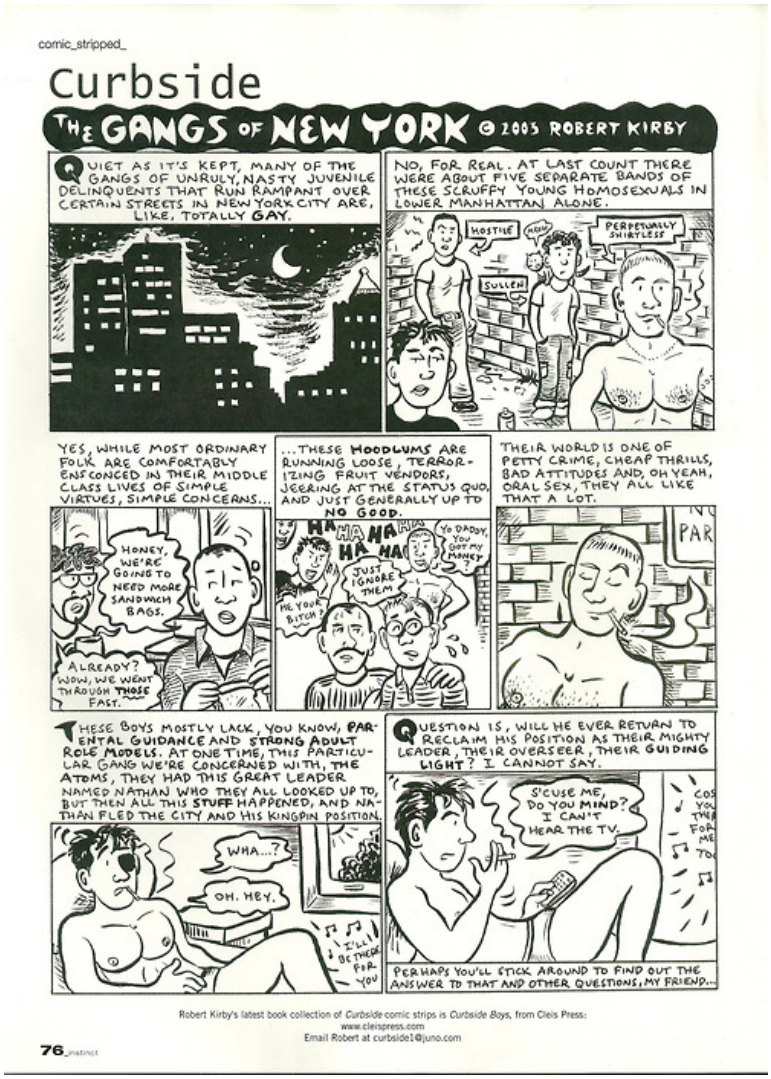

Fig. 1-1 - Robert Kirby, "The Gangs of New York" (*Curbside*), *Instinct* no. 55 (November 2003), 76.

Fig. 1-2 – The original version of the censored fifth panel of Kirby's "Gangs of New York."

For Foucault, discourses are the bearers of subject positions – discourse shapes human subjectivity, how human beings see and understand themselves and one another. For example, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault focuses on how, in nineteenth century Europe, sexual identity was constituted by legal and medical discourses, which distinguished between normality and deviance. The modern notion of "the homosexual" as a distinctive sexual "type" was constructed in and through discourses produced in the fields of law, medicine, education and religion. However, as Katherine Sender argues, since the early twentieth century, the role of such traditional institutions in shaping sexual identity has been displaced (albeit unevenly) by institutions of consumption: the fields of advertising, marketing, public relations and commercial media, including the media representations created from within mainstream gay culture.[43]

Queer alternative comics define themselves in contrast to this gay mainstream. Recurring themes within queer male alternative comics include: a rejection of mainstream gay club culture, and an embrace of punk and indie; a critique of gay consumerism and commercialization; a challenging of gay male "body fascism" combined with a valorization of a wider range of gay male body types as potentially desirable; a questioning of traditional views of sexual and gender identity, and an understanding of sexual desire as potentially fluid and mutable; and a complex depiction of sex that goes beyond the entrenched either/or positions of the "gay male sex wars."

Outline of Research

This thesis addresses and seeks to provide answers to the following questions: How is the history of American gay male comics related to social and political changes in American gay culture? What are the dominant genres within American gay male comics, and what are their conventions and characteristics? How is the subfield of queer alternative comics demarcated? Why did these comics begin to appear in the 1990s? What relationship do they have to queer

[43] Sender, *Business*, 142–143.

culture, politics and history? How is the 1990s wave of queer alternative comics different from the LGBT comics that came before them? How do they respond to the conventions of the earlier gay male comics, to what extent do they reproduce these conventions and to what extent can they be said to subvert them?

To answer these questions I have chosen to combine textual analysis with semi-structured interviewing; as well as analysing the comics, I have also asked for the individual artists' own reflections on their work, as the "owners" of that work. The interviews aim to explore the interaction between what is going on in a culture at a specific time, and what is going on in the individual's personal experiences. How are specific cultural processes actually experienced by those individuals who are most directly affected by or involved with them? How did cultural processes, such as the questioning and loosening of hard-and-fast ideas about sexuality and identity, interact with the personal experiences of the individuals involved in the production of these comics?

There are four basic types of interviewing, as outlined by H. Russell Bernard: informal; unstructured; structured; and semi-structured. A semi-structured interviewing style shares much of the "freewheeling quality" of unstructured interviewing but is based on the use of an interview guide, "a written list of questions and topics that need to be covered in a particular order."[44] I have chosen semi-structured interviewing, as it allows interviewees "to open up and let them express themselves on their own terms, and at their own pace"[45] and is an excellent method of learning "about the *lived experience* of fellow human beings."[46] Interviewing the creators of queer comics is also an ethical decision, allowing individuals who have traditionally been marginalized within academic discourses to participate in the analysis of their work.

In Chapter Two, I present my Literature Review, focused on three main areas: queer theory, lesbian and gay cultural history, and comics studies. I argue that while there have been many extensive scholarly works on a variety of

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[44] H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches,* Fourth Edition (Lanham, MD and Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006), 212
[45] Ibid., 211.
[46] Ibid.

different forms of gay cultural production, including visual art, literature, cinema and theatre, there is a significant gap in the study of gay male comics, which my thesis aims to fill. I discuss the existing literature on queer theory and how this provides a framework for understanding key issues in many of the comics discussed in this study, and I also draw on the relatively new field of comics studies to discuss the analytical tools this field offers for studying comics as aesthetic productions.

The remaining, core chapters of this thesis present a history of the major "waves" of LGBT comics history, sketch out the genre characteristics and conventions of the gay porno and the gay ghetto comics genres, and discuss the ways in which queer alternative comics take up, adapt and subvert the generic conventions of more mainstream gay male comics in order to create a complex and diverse representation of gay male identity, sexuality and community.

In Chapter Three, the first of my five core chapters, I draw on the little academic work that exists on the history of gay comics as well as on my own interviews with earlier gay comics creators. I break down gay comics production into a number of successive "waves" and show how these waves of production are situated in specific historical and cultural contexts, demonstrating the links between the representations found in the comics and the ways in which gay and queer identities were conceptualized in these different periods. I argue that the first gay male comics – emerging in the late 1950s and the 1960s - were in many ways subversive vis-à-vis mainstream heterosexual American culture, creating representations that resisted the stereotypes of gay men that circulated within the American public sphere – as sick, sinful, effeminate or weak. However, I also argue that fairly quickly, representations of gay men within gay comics and illustrations took on a stereotypical character, coming to constitute what Stuart Hall has called a "regime of representation,"[47] and that two dominant genres soon emerged in the gay male comics field – what I call "gay porno" and "gay ghetto" comics – each of which came with their own codes and conventions.

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[47] Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in his, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 232.

In Chapter Four, I map the generic codes and conventions of the gay porno and the gay ghetto comics, and explore how they relate to the dominant gay habitus and the field of gay male culture. I argue that the narratives and representations found within the gay porno and gay ghetto comics participate in the construction and reinforcement of a particular kind of representation of gay male identity - a dominant gay habitus - employing representational regimes that create a visible and "typical" gayness. In doing so, these comics naturalize and reify certain (culturally and historically specific) gay scenes and lifestyles as exemplary of "what the gay community is *really* like," thereby presenting an image of gay male identity as relatively unified and stable. While they sometimes do question aspects of gay male culture, the majority of gay ghetto and gay porno comics tend not to be critical, representing an idealized version of the gay male body as typical, valuable and desirable, while often marginalizing or devaluing gay bodies and identities that fail to conform to this ideal.

In Chapter Five, I discuss how alternative gay cartoonists respond to dominant representations of gay community in the gay ghetto comic, dramatizing the tensions between the queer individual and the mainstream gay community, and producing alternative queer male identities and cultures. In mainstream gay ghetto comics, the gay community is often represented as a welcoming haven in a homophobic world. However, this chapter focuses on gay alternative cartoonists who foreground more ambivalent or negative feelings about the gay community. I focus mainly on the work of Robert Kirby, and in particular his series *Curbside*.[48] Drawing on Michel de Certeau's notion of the "tactics" of the subordinated, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's postmodern concept of community, I argue that Kirby critiques the commodified nature of the gay mainstream, presenting an alternative version of community. I will also draw further on Katherine Sender's work on the dominant gay habitus to argue that Kirby's comics posit an alternative gay habitus constructed through references

[48] Robert Kirby's self-syndicated strip *Curbside* was published in various newspapers between 1991-2008. There have been two collections: Robert Kirby, *Curbside* (New York: Hobnob Press, 1998); Robert Kirby, *Curbside Boys: The New York Years* (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2002).

to "alternative" music, tastes, and practices, and displays of what Sarah Thornton has called "subcultural capital." They also represent a wider range of gay male bodies as sexually attractive, and make "shy gay nerds" and "pencil-necked geeks" their main protagonists, in contrast with the athletic "gym clones" so often central to the conventional gay ghetto comics.

In Chapter Six, I focus on alternative queer porno comics, concentrating on the work of Jon Macy, and in particular on his graphic novel Fearful Hunter.[49] These alternative queer porno comics use some of the conventions of the gay porno comics genre, such as the representation of idealized bodies and explicit sex. However, I draw on the work of Sarah Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on unhappiness and shame, arguing that – unlike the eternally horny and happy protagonists of traditional gay porno comics, the heroes of the alternative gay porno comics are more fully-developed, rounded characters with a wide range of emotional expression. I also draw on Thomas Piontek's writings on the "gay male sex wars" to demonstrate the complexity of the ways in which these comics represent sex, refusing on the whole to succumb to an either/or understanding of monogamy versus promiscuity as more or less valuable or ethically "correct." In these comics, sex is intended not only to arouse the reader but also to more fully explore character, and issues of sexual identity, emotions and relationships. Some of these cartoonists set their comics very much in the "real world," while others use fantastic and supernatural themes, but in different ways they critique constrictive notions of gay or queer community. In this chapter, I draw on the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity, as well as Georges Bataille's writings on eroticism, and Leo Bersani's work on gay male sex as identity-shattering; I argue that in the alternative queer porno comics, bodies, identities and desires are often represented as fluid and not entirely stable, and queer sex as a force that potentially transforms conventional understandings of the "normal" and the "natural."

In Chapter Seven, I discuss those comics that seem to utterly reject the conventions of both gay ghetto and gay porno comics, and set their narratives in times and spaces that allow them to avoid a direct representation of

[49] Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2014).

contemporary gay life and culture. I focus on two main examples: David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*,[50] which tells the story of a 10-year-old, sissy, gay boy, growing up in a homophobic heterosexual culture in the 1970s; and Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny*,[51] which is set in an otherworldly realm of anthropomorphic foxes and rabbits, and focuses on its main protagonist, a young fox who enjoys dressing up as a rabbit. I argue that by avoiding representing the gay scene and avoiding gay comics genre conventions, these comics, in different ways, critique more conventional understandings of gay male identity. Kelly's *Steven's Comics* vindicates the "sissy boy" that Thomas Piontek argues has been "betrayed" by more mainstream gay politics, theory, and culture, while Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* depicts an otherworldly realm of culturally-constructed and fluid identity which cannot easily be read as a simple metaphor for gay identity. Judith Butler's writings on the performativity of identity are again useful here for understanding the way these comics – in different ways – demonstrate the constructedness of gender and sexual identities, challenging the conventional representations of such identities in both heterosexual and gay mainstream media.

Finally in Chapter Eight - my Conclusion - I summarize the core conclusions of this research, as well as pointing toward further potential areas of academic investigation that this study has opened up. I consider the theoretical and methodological implications of my project for comics scholarship, lesbian and gay cultural studies, and queer studies, as well as reflecting on the current state of LGBT comics. I conclude that while there are overlaps between the approaches of different gay/queer male cartoonists from different generations, the field is by no means monolithic or homogenous. During the 1970s and 1980s, by and large, gay male comics had ultimately been concerned with consolidating a relatively stable, unified sense of gay identity and community. The queer male alternative comics that emerged in the 1990s – influenced by the queer cultural turn, the DIY ethos of zine culture, and the

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[50] David Kelly, *Rainy Day Recess: The Complete Steven's Comics* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2011).
[51] Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2007).

spirit of the broader alternative comics scene – were far more concerned with questioning and challenging the normative, dominant values of mainstream gay culture, and carving out a space for different kinds of representation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This thesis contributes new knowledge to the fields of queer studies, lesbian and gay cultural histories, and comics scholarship. It not only fills gaps in LGBT cultural history and comics scholarship, but also contributes to the field of queer studies, examining how certain important theories and debates in queer politics, culture and scholarship – such as the questioning of unitary notions of gay identity, community and sex – are explored and "played out" in the narratives and representations of comics created by queer authors and aimed primarily at a queer readership.

Part One of this chapter reviews the existing literature in the field of lesbian/gay cultural history in order to highlight the gaps in scholarship which this study fills. Part Two focuses on queer theory, which provides a framework for understanding key issues in many of the comics discussed in this study. Queer theoretical analyses of the performative nature of sexual and gendered identities, and especially the work of Judith Butler, are pertinent to an understanding of many of the comics discussed in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven of this thesis, which explore disruptions to conventional understandings of identity. Queer theorists' interest, too, in emotions and the notion of queer archives of feelings are also relevant to the comics discussed in this study, which in themselves can be understood as archives of emotions. Part Three reviews existing comics scholarship in order to identify useful methodological approaches to the study of comics as aesthetic productions. This thesis draws particularly on the work of Scott McCloud and Charles Hatfield, as well as Josef Witek and Neil Cohn's discussion of comics styles, in order to analyse the comics discussed in the following chapters.

Part 1: Lesbian/Gay Cultural Histories

For the last thirty years, lesbian and gay scholarship has investigated a varied range of LGBT cultural production. Nevertheless, it has almost completely ignored LGBT comics. Such scholarship can be understood, collectively, as parts of a wider project of constructing a revisionist cultural history. As Claude J.

Summers puts it in his introduction to *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, this "places the achievements of . . . queer artists in historical contexts and . . . privileges the representation of subjects that have traditionally been censored or marginalized."[52]

Historical overviews of lesbian and gay cultural production include encyclopaedic compilations, collections of critical essays, and books that take a more sustained look at specific art forms. LGBT cultural histories have been interested in lesbian and gay individuals both as cultural practitioners (artists, writers, and so on), and as subjects and consumers of arts and culture. Such historical overviews have focused on the visual arts,[53] film and video,[54] theatre,[55] and music,[56] as well as on literature and poetry.[57]

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[52] Claude J. Summers, "Introduction" in his, ed., *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004), ix.

[53] Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994 [1986]); Emmanuel Cooper, *Fully Exposed: The male Nude in Photograph*y, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995 [1990]); Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph* (London and New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Elizabeth Ashburn, *Lesbian Art: An Encounter with Power* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1996); Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, eds., *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Cherry Smyth, *Damn Fine Art* (London: Cassell, 1996); Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Deborah Bright, ed., *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1998); James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York: Viking, 1999); Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2000); Dominique Fernandez, *A Hidden Love: Art and Homosexuality* (Munich and London: Prestel, 2002); James Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art* (New York: Park Stone, 2003); Claude J. Summers, ed., *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004); Michael Petry, *Hidden Histories: 20th Century Male Same Sex Lovers in the Visual Arts* (London: Artmedia Press, 2004).

[54] Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, New edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993 [1972]); Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1987 [1981]); Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003 [1990]); Bad Object-Choices, eds., *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991); Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson, eds., *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Gay Film and Video* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Tamsin Wilton, ed*., Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Stephen Bourne, *Brief Encounters: Lesbians and Gays in British Cinema 1930-1971*, (London: Cassell, 1996); Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996); Ellis Hanson, ed*., Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999); Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000); Michele Aaron, *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, eds., *Queer Cinema, The Film Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Claude J. Summers, ed., *The Queer Encyclopedia of Film*

As a verbal/visual hybrid, comics might conceivably be included in any history of lesbian and gay literature and/or visual art, potentially even playing a significant role in such histories. But while there are occasional mentions of queer comics in some, they often demonstrate a lack of understanding of the medium and its history. In Alexander Doty and Ben Gove's essay "Queer Representation in the Mass Media," which concentrates mainly on television and popular music, queer comics are relegated to a mere footnote.[58] In *The Lesbian and Gay Literary Heritage*, gay comics are mentioned briefly in the entry

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and Television (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2005); Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Robin Griffiths, ed., *British Queer Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

[55] John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1992]); Nicholas de Jongh, *Not In Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

[56] Philip Brett, Gary Thomas and Elizabeth Wood, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994); John Gill, *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music* (London: Cassell, 1994); Richard Smith, *Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Music* (London: Cassell, 1995); Claude J. Summers, ed., *The Queer Encyclopedia of Music, Dance and Musical Theater* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2005).

[57] Jeffrey Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature 1890-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977); Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Judy Grahn, *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (San Francisco: Spinsters, Ink., 1985); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987); Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum and Michael Moon, eds., *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989); Mark Lilly, ed., *Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Claude J. Summers, *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1990); David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Wayne R. Dines and Stephen Donaldson, eds., *Homosexual Themes in Literary Studies* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1992); Sally R. Munt, ed., *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); Mark Lilly, *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); Sharon Malinowski, ed., *Gay and Lesbian Literature* (Detroit and London: St. James Press, 1994); Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995); Claude J. Summers, ed., *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995); Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); Gary Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

[58] Alexander Doty and Ben Gove, "Queer Representation in the Mass Media" in Andy Medhurst and Sally R. Munt, eds., *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London & Washington: Cassell, 1997), 95, n. 2.

on "Humor," a decision which demonstrates a stereotypical view of the emotional range the comics medium is capable of. Some of the better-known queer cartoonists such as Alison Bechdel and Howard Cruse are mentioned briskly, and comics are described simply as "[a] newer form of gay humor."[59]

In Emmanuel Cooper's *The Sexual Perspective* – the first panoramic overview of gay art in the modern era – the only mention of comics appears in a discussion of Tom of Finland's work. Cooper contextualizes his art in relation to only two earlier erotic illustrators - George Quaintance and Neil Blate ("Blade") – and makes no mention of more contemporary erotic gay comics. In his later survey, *Pictures and Passions*, James M. Saslow links the work of Tom of Finland and Blade to the non-pornographic works of queer cartoonists including Alison Bechdel and Howard Cruse, and also makes mention of Japanese *manga*. Nevertheless, his book is too focused on "fine art" to devote more than a passing reference to queer comics.

There have been some valuable contributions among queer scholars to chronicling the history of LGBT comics. Thomas Waugh has compiled two collections of pre-Stonewall gay erotic illustrations and comics, entitled *Out/Lines: Underground Gay Graphics from Before Stonewall* and *Lust Unearthed: Vintage Gay Graphics from the DuBek Collection*, which include critical essays in addition to reproductions of images.[60] Waugh has also collaborated with erotic illustrator Felix Lance Falkon on an updated edition of his 1972 book *A Historic Collection of Gay Art*, which largely focuses on the erotic illustrations of a number of artists who also produced pornographic gay comics.[61] Such focused study marks a beginning for chronicling the histories of early gay erotic comics and illustration.

However it has mainly been gay comics creators themselves who have also acted as historians and scholars, documenting queer comics history in

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[59] Arnie Kantrowitz, "Humor" in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 380.
[60] Thomas Waugh, *Out/Lines: Underground Gay Graphics from Before Stonewall* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002) and Thomas Waugh with Willie Walker, *Lust Unearthed: Vintage Gay Graphics from the DuBek Collection* Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004).
[61] Felix Lance Falkon and Thomas Waugh, *Gay Art: A Historic Collection*, rev. ed. (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006).

books and articles, and this study is indebted to the pioneering efforts of these cartoonist-historians. In 1986, Jerry Mills, creator of the comic strip *Poppers*, presented a detailed history of gay male comics in his introduction to the first volume of *Meatmen*.[62] In 1989, gay cartoonist Robert Triptow edited *Gay Comics*, essentially a "best of" collection of strips mainly drawn from the anthology *Gay Comix*, but which also included samples of older gay-themed cartoons, historical commentary, and interviews with creators.[63] A valuable early contribution to the historiography of LGBT comics, Triptow's compilation is however far from comprehensive, offering little coverage of LGBT comics prior to 1980 (the year in which the anthology *Gay Comix* debuted).

Andy Mangels' two-part article, "Out of the Closet and Into the Comics" presented an overview of the history of gay representations in mainstream comics up to that point, along with interviews with lesbian and gay individuals working in the comics industry.[64] While groundbreaking, Mangels' text is of limited usefulness to the current study, as it mainly concentrates on mainstream comics.

Dyke Strippers: Lesbian Cartoonists from A-Z, edited by Roz Warren, is an encyclopaedia of lesbian and bisexual female cartoonists.[65] While a useful resource, Warren's text is not intended to be an in-depth history, and of course does not mention gay male comics at all. Heterosexual feminist cartoonist Trina Robbins' various books on female comics and their creators[66] all include some information on lesbian cartoonists and comic book characters, but none present a detailed history of queer comics.

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[62] Jerry Mills, "Introduction" in *Meatmen: An Anthology of Gay Male Comics*, Vol. 1, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: GS Press/Leyland Publications, 1986), 7-14.
[63] Robert Triptow, ed., *Gay Comics* (New York: Plume, 1989).
[64] Andy Mangels, "Out of the Closet and Into the Comics: Gays in Comics. The Creations and the Creators: Part I," *Amazing Heroes* No. 143 (June 15, 1988), 39-54, and "Out of the Closet and Into the Comics: Gays in Comics. The Creations and the Creators: Part II," *Amazing Heroes* No. 144 (July 1, 1988), 47-66.
[65] Roz Warren, *Dyke Strippers: Lesbian Cartoonists from A-Z* (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 1995).
[66] Trina Robbins, *A Century of Women Cartoonists* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993); The Great Women Superheroes (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1996); *From Girls to Grrrlz* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 1999); *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists, 1896-2013* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2013).

Paul Gravett's "Sex and Spandex" focuses on gay superheroes in both mainstream, and to a lesser degree, independent comics.[67] Howard Stangroom's essay "The Comic Book Closet" summarized and brought the history of lesbian and gay representations in both mainstream superhero comics and in lesbian and gay media further up to date.[68] Again, these are valuable contributions to historiography, but limited by their focus on mainstream and larger-scale independent comics.

More recently, French gay cartoonist Jean-Paul Jennequin published an interesting article, "Gay Comics USA: Entre Transgression et Conformisme."[69] This is a rare, relevant piece of writing, resonating strongly with the concerns and perspective of this thesis, and I draw on Jennequin's work in Chapter Three, in which I detail the history of LGBT comics. Jennequin argues that American gay comics have been dominated by eroticism and humour; I have described these two generic tendencies in this thesis as "gay porno" and "gay ghetto" genres (Jennequin calls the latter the "gay sitcom"). Like this thesis, Jennequin's "Gay Comics USA" addresses how gay American comics have both challenged heteronormative values *and* contributed to the construction of normative gay ideals and stereotypes, and Jennequin's writing has been invaluable to the development of this thesis. However, in my thesis I have been concerned in showing that not all gay porno and gay ghetto comics are simply the same. For example, Jennequin sees Glenn Hanson and Allen Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys*, Gregg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*, and Robert Kirby's *Curbside* as conforming to his definition of the "gay sitcom,"[70] or what I call gay ghetto comics. I agree that *Curbside* bears superficial similarities to gay ghetto comics like *Chelsea Boys* and *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*, such as focusing on a group of gay friends. However, this thesis argues that *Curbside*, and other alternative queer strips like it, in fact challenge and subvert the traditional gay ghetto comic, and critique the values and norms of the "gay mainstream."

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[67] Paul Gravett, "Sex and Spandex," *Attitude* No. 90 (October 2001), 66-70.
[68] Howard Stangroom, "The Comic Book Closet," *Comics Forum* No. 26 (Summer 2003), 44-50.
[69] Jean-Paul Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA: Entre Transgression et Conformisme," *Art & Fact* No. 27 (2008), 36-43.
[70] Ibid., 41-42.

In 2012, German publisher Bruno Gmünder released a collection of gay comics by a relatively small number of European, American and Japanese gay male cartoonists titled *Stripped: A Story of Gay Comics*.[71] This book contains biographical information about a number of cartoonists and some historical information, but is by no means – and not intended to be – an exhaustive overview, and largely focuses on artists who have had collections published by Gmünder. Also in 2012 American cartoonist Justin Hall edited a collection titled *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, released by renowned indie comics publisher Fantagraphics.[72] Hall's book is a much more comprehensive compendium of LGBT comics work. It includes an introduction that further updates the history, including a section on transgender creators and webcomics in the twenty-first century. It does make note of the shifts in the LGBT comics field in the 1990s and the ways in which alternative queer cartoonists began to critique mainstream gay culture – and in fact quotes an earlier unpublished version of this thesis.[73] However, it is not intended to be an in-depth study of these queer comics and, as such, does not provide more detailed analysis of queer comics.

The Internet has also provided some resources, with glbtq.com featuring a brief essay by Teresa Theophano entitled "Comic Strips and Cartoons,"[74] and the websites of Prism Comics and The Gay League[75] both featuring profiles on LGBT comics creators, interviews, and critical essays. The Gay League website also features a timeline of major events in the history of queer comics, and since 2001 Prism have produced an annual paper publication which includes essays, interviews and samples of comics.

In Chapter Three, I explore the history of the LGBT comics field in greater detail, bringing together the research that has been done by others with material drawn from interviews I have undertaken with the key figures in early

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[71] Markus Pfalzgraf, *Stripped: A Story of Gay Comics* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2012).
[72] Justin Hall, *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2012).
[73] Ibid., np.
[74] Teresa Theophano, "Comic Strips and Cartoons," in *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*, general ed. Claude J. Summers, 2002, www.glbtq.com/arts/comic_strips_cartoons.html, accessed 8th March 2006, 1:55 pm.
[75] See www.prismcomics.org and www.gayleague.com.

gay comics history, and organizing the history of the field by establishing a number of "waves" of activity. In Chapter Four, I map the conventions and characteristics of the two dominant genres within gay male comics: gay porno and gay ghetto comics.

A small number of academic essays have focused on specific queer comics. In Gabrielle N. Dean's essay "The 'Phallacies' of Dyke Comic Strips," she argues that comic strips may be a particularly effective means for lesbian feminists to articulate an oppositional subjectivity in relation to patriarchy. However, her overall analysis is tainted by her own embarrassment over her pleasure in the comics medium: "Why am I so seduced by this seemingly innocuous, even vacuous, even at times offensive, form of entertainment?"[76] Dean's deployment of a psychoanalytic theoretical framework can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize her study, similar to the way that such theories were previously used to justify the study of another popular form – cinema. As Mark Jancovich argues, psychoanalytic criticism is problematic because it is "ultimately unfalsifiable," that is, "any response made in opposition to psychoanalytic claims can simply and easily be dismissed . . . as the product of repression or resistance" and hence psychoanalytic critiques have "an inherent tendency to produce . . . interpretations which not only bear no relation to one's experience of a text, but positively contradict those experiences."[77] For example, Dean critiques Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*, arguing that in the strip, "the phallus . . . is the organizing principle of community, which uses the portrayal of difference, paradoxically, to signify sameness." This argument allows Dean to find in Bechdel's comic a "denial of racial difference" despite Bechdel's representation of a variety of dykes, of different races and body sizes, and to claim that the strip avoids "the explicit representation of sex" and hence makes lesbian desire invisible, in spite of the fact that the strip does at times depict sexual situations, and often dramatizes

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[76] Gabrielle N. Dean, "The 'Phallacies' of Dyke Comic Strips," in Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry, eds., *The Gay '90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formations in Queer Studies* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 220.
[77] Mark Jancovich, "Screen Theory," in Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich, eds., *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 147.

debates about contentious lesbian sexual practices such as butch/femme role-play.[78]

Moreover, although Dean mentions the freedoms "the material and economic circumstances of [comics] production"[79] potentially offer, she does not give any serious consideration to how these factors shape the content of comics. Her analysis is limited by the fact that she does not include any reflection on those material and economic circumstances, or on the comics' content, from their creators. Alison Bechdel, for example, has talked about the creative independence the self-syndicated comic strip format gives her: "I'm really happy. I can draw naked people. I can write about politics. I mean, papers are still suspending episodes of *Doonesbury*. I'm not interested in making those kind of compromises."[80] In my analysis of queer comics I feel it is essential to incorporate creators' comments and reflect on the (sub)cultural context of comics production in order to avoid misinterpretation.

Gilad Padva's essay "Dreamboys, Meatmen and Werewolves: Visualizing Erotic Identities in All-Male Comic Strips" focuses on the work of Jon Macy, whose work I will discuss in detail in Chapter Six. Padva analyses "Tail," an erotic narrative by Macy, "examining its highly polysemic qualities and its queer reading and erotic politicization of Sigmund Freud's myth of the Werewolf."[81] Padva presents an insightful exploration of the ways in which Macy's comics story contributes "to the alternative discourse of sexuality, passion, body worship/body fascism and contemporary phallic regimes"[82] and I draw on his work in Chapter Six, which explores the work of Jon Macy in greater depth.

Edward H. Sewell, Jr.'s essay "Queer Characters in Comic Strips" is an academic study that argues that comic strips by queer creators, featuring queer characters and aimed at queer audiences open up a space in which queers "can

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[78] Dean, "Phallacies," 213-214.
[79] Ibid., 201.
[80] Alison Bechdel quoted in Mark Fitzgerald, "The Biggest Closet in Newspapering," *Editor & Publisher*, October 15 1994, 14.
[81] Gilad Padva, "Dreamboys, Meatmen and Werewolves: Visualizing Erotic Identities in All-Male Comic Strips," *Sexualities* 8, No. 5 (December 2005), 589.
[82] Ibid., 597.

acknowledge their own values [and] be authentic."[83] I have already dealt with Sewell's essay at some length in my Introduction, and I would reiterate that his analysis lacks a consideration of the differences *within* gay/queer culture. An awareness of such differences and conflicts will be important for my own study of queer comics. Therefore, in the next section of this literature review, I discuss queer theory in more detail, and examine how the various debates about the conflicts and differences within LGBT culture are relevant to the comics this study focuses on.

Part 2: Queer Theory

For most of the twentieth century, the word "queer" was used in American and British societies as a term of homophobic abuse. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the term was reclaimed and redefined by various dissident groups, including activist groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation in the USA, and the loose post-punk subculture known as queercore. The term eventually became so fashionable that in some contemporary uses, "queer" is now divorced from many of its socio-political and subcultural connotations, functioning solely as a synonym for terms like LGBT.

I discuss queercore in more depth in Chapter Three, as part of the history of queer comics. In this section, I explore the divergent and overlapping ways in which the term "queer" has been used in "radical" political activism and academic scholarship, looking at post-structuralist influence on queer theory, and the impact of Judith Butler's writings on performativity. Queer theoretical understandings of identity, as I will show, provide a framework for understanding representations of queer identity in alternative comics. I then discuss how queer theory has been contested and critiqued from various perspectives.

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[83] Sewell, "Queer Characters," 253.

Queer Activism

The appropriation of queer, and its varied usages, must be understood against the wider context of divisions within lesbian and gay politics and culture, which had developed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and a crisis point in American and British politics and society toward the end of the 1980s that led to a new period of radical political activism. Steven Seidman's essay "Identity Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture" explores the origins of some of those divisions, presenting a clear account of the development of gay politics and theory from the 1960s through to the 1980s.[84] Jagose's *Queer Theory* elaborates on this history, with Jagose carefully tracing the overlaps and the ruptures between queer theory, early homophile movements, gay liberation, and the feminist movement.[85]

In the 1960s and early 1970s, gay politics was dominated by a Liberationist model, aimed at freeing individuals from the constraints of a repressive sex/gender system. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the gay movement adopted a dominant "ethnic/ethnic minority model" which emphasised "identity-based interest-group politics."[86] From its inception, gay liberation was not a homogeneous movement, but diverse and eventually divided within itself. Although "small numbers of women had always been involved in gay liberation, and equally small numbers of lesbians in the women's movement, lesbians increasingly felt that they were marginalised in both" and inaugurated a gender-separatist lesbian feminist theory and politics.[87] The early 1970s and mid-1980s were increasingly marked by a separation of lesbian and gay male cultures. Some lesbians continued to identify

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[84] Steven Seidman, "Identity Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory,* ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105-142.
[85] See Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1996), Chapters 3-5 respectively.
[86] Seidman, "Identity Politics," 117.
[87] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 44.

with an inclusive (albeit male-dominated) gay movement, but others favoured relative or complete separatism.[88]

An "ethnic identity model" of politics "acquired cultural dominance" in gay male and lesbian communities, but these were fractured once more by internal discord over race, bisexuality, and contentious sexual practises such as SM, fetishism and paedophilia.[89] Gay identity politics was also challenged by an emerging constructionist scholarship in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Social constructionism asserted that "the categories of homosexual, gay, and lesbian do not signify a common, universal experience"[90] or a transcultural, ahistorical "essence." Therefore, it undermined the ethnic model's claims for a distinctively "gay" culture and community.

By the mid-1980s, these fractures were temporarily smoothed over in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.[91] The AIDS pandemic intensified growing frustration among lesbians and gay men with the reactionary politics of the New Right in the form of Thatcher's Conservative government in the UK and the Republican administration led by Reagan and later Bush Snr in America.[92] For lesbians and gays, as well as other minorities, legal inequalities were still in place despite increasingly visible campaigning: "Symptomatically," writes Jeffrey Weeks, "there was a distinct closing of social space"[93] and a gradual erosion of the gains of earlier decades. This culminated in a crisis at the end of the 1980s, marked by Thatcher's third election victory in 1987 and Reagan's succession by the equally right-wing Bush in 1989. In the UK, an atmosphere of homophobic intolerance seemed condoned by the government's notorious Section 28, which stated that a local authority "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of

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[88] Seidman, "Identity Politics," 117.
[89] Ibid., 117-127. See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, rev. edition (London: Quartet, 1990), 232-237.
[90] Ibid., 126.
[91] Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 51.
[92] Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), 33-57. See also Weeks, *Coming Out*, 237-244.
[93] Weeks, *Coming Out*, 238.

the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."[94] Donald Hall describes the "simmering anger" growing in the United States at laws that criminalized homosexual activity, as well as with media stereotyping, and politicians "who seemed willing to turn a blind eye toward the impending death of a generation of gay men."[95] The reclaiming of queer, then, can be seen as marking the "moment" of a fierce impulse to revolt against this oppressive atmosphere.

One result of the severity of the AIDS crisis was coalition-building between men and women of different sexualities, races and belief systems, who came together promote awareness about AIDS, raise money, "and secure greater public funding for and government action on AIDS research and prevention."[96] Another was the formation of "radical" political activist groups; believing that the appeal to tolerance which characterized "ethnic" gay identity politics had been ineffectual, groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation adopted more aggressive strategies.[97]

As Lisa Duggan puts it, in radical queer activism a "rhetoric of difference replaces the more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity to other groups."[98] This might seem to contradict Joseph Bristow and Angelia Wilson's observation that "queer" activism "signals a willingness to make alliances across difference" and a desire "not to reinstate the very forms of divisiveness that frustrated our political agenda in the 1970s and 1980s."[99] In fact, groups like Queer Nation used "queer" partly as a signifier of inclusivity, and partly to construct a confrontational identity and set of strategies that threw "perversion in the public's face" and "aimed to embrace the diverse lesbian, gay and bisexual

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[94] Local Government Act 1988 (c. 9), Section 28. www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28. Accessed 11th August 2014, 4:13 am.
[95] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 52.
[96] Ibid., 52.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January-March 1992, 15.
[99] Joseph Bristow and Angelia R. Wilson, "Introduction," *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 11.

identities that had been suppressed or marginalized by a restrictive politics of identity."[100]

However, some critics have questioned just how different such supposedly "radical" strategies really are from the more "ethnic" gay politics, which also attempt to project a common identity for their constituents. Duggan notes that "Queer Nation, for some, is quite simply a gay nationalist organization"[101] and reminds us of the parallels with traditional politics which "define the nation and its interests as unity; they suppress internal difference and political conflict."[102] Other critics express suspicion that such innovations have simply become "alternative," voguish forms of gay conformity. Paul Burston, for example, opines that for most gay men and lesbians, "'Queer' is simply 'Gay' with knobs and nipple-rings on."[103]

Despite such criticisms, as Jagose points out, in the first instance at least, queer politics was partially enabled by discontents within gay and lesbian communities that engendered the "suspicion that normative models of identity will never suffice for the representational work demanded of them."[104] Such suspicions also gave rise – lagging slightly behind queer's deployment within activism – to the genesis of academic "queer theory." Queer theory is important to this thesis because of my project's emphasis on the differences within the field of gay/queer male comics production. The few historical essays on gay comics that exist tend to treat gay male comics as if they are a relatively homogenous mass; the differences between different gay/queer male comics are rarely discussed in depth. It is my intention to show the ways in which the "alternative queer comics" that emerged in the early 1990s were different from the gay comics that had come before; while they did not break with the conventions of the older gay male comics completely, these queer alternative comics did represent a shift in approaches to representing homosexual male identities, and were influenced by the shifts taking place in queer activism and

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[100] Ibid., 9.
[101] Duggan, "Perfectly Queer," 21.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Paul Burston, "Stepford Boyz" in his *What Are You Looking At?: Queer Sex, Style and Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1995), 101.
[104] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 71.

theorization at the time. Many of queer theory's concerns with the questioning of stable, rigid notions of gay (and lesbian) identity are played out, in different ways, in the queer male alternative comics discussed in this thesis.

Michel Foucault and Post-Structuralism

Jagose's 1996 book *Queer Theory*, along with Sullivan's *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* and Hall's *Queer Theories*, both published in 2003, provide excellent, accessible introductions to the field. As Jagose describes, queer theory can be broadly understood as "calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity" by deconstructing the binary oppositions, categories, and equations that sustain them.[105]

Jagose describes the theories of Althusser, Freud, Lacan and de Saussure as "provid[ing] the post-structuralist context in which queer emerges,"[106] while Sullivan writes of the influence of post-structuralism on "notions of sexual identity and politics," pointing to the influence of Lyotard and Derrida.[107] Hall too writes that "those individuals broadly termed 'post-structuralists' were especially influential"[108] on the development of queer theory, and offers this clear, succinct definition of post-structuralism:

> If "structuralism" can be understood as the search for clear and certain relationships between the structure of language and our perception of reality – a scientific pursuit really – then post-structuralism is skeptical of any possible delineation of cause and effect or discovery of stable, knowable structures underlying perception. Both trace their insights back to the field of linguistics, the study of language. [109]

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[105] Ibid., 97.
[106] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 71. See 78-9 for a more detailed summary of the relationship of these writers to queer theory.
[107] See Nikki Sullivan, *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 39-42.
[108] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 61.
[109] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 61.

Hall points to the influence of Lacan and Derrida in particular,[110] but, as he emphasizes, "no theorist of identity has been more central to 'queer' theorizations than Michel Foucault, whose insights and investigations changed the way that academics and activists both thought about and responded to the power of sociosexual norms."[111] In *The Will To Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Foucault analyses the Victorian drive to categorize individuals, interpreting it as a strategy for allaying wide-ranging social fears about the unmooring of traditional notions of class, gender and race by attempting to fix and stabilize identities. He points out that we continue to live with such hierarchies, categorizations and binary definitions to this day. He narrates the "invention" of modern homosexual identity from a radical social constructionist viewpoint, arguing that in the late nineteenth century, the notion of the homosexual as an identifiable type of person begins to emerge in various judicial and medical discourses: "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood". [112] Defined solely in terms of her or his sexual desires and activities, from around 1870 the homosexual comes to be understood as "a species."[113]

Richard Dyer points out some problematic aspects of the Foucauldian "invention" of the homosexual category, which tends to ignore, and obscure, more recent historical research which demonstrates that before the Victorian era, same-sex desiring men *did* organize subcultures around a sense of their own sexual difference.[114] Despite these criticisms, Dyer asserts the value of Foucault's analysis in highlighting the ways in which the nineteenth-century construction of sexual identity gives rise to the notion that same-sex attraction goes along with "other non-sexual characteristics that are held either to account for or flow from a different sexuality."[115] Such notions of a stable, unified "gay

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[110] Ibid., 61-62.
[111] Ibid., 65.
[112] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981; 1978, Fr. 1976), 43.
[113] Ibid., 43.
[114] Richard Dyer, "Seen To Be Believed," in his *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 20. See for example Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1988 [1982]).
[115] Dyer, Richard Dyer, "Introduction," *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge), 2002, 5.

identity" are constructed and reinforced not only in heterosexist discourses but also, as Seidman notes, within "the dominant representations, social conventions, and political strategies"[116] of lesbian and gay culture. Hence, Foucault's theories are valuable in pointing out that human sexuality can only be understood within specific historical and cultural contexts, and as such there can be no singular, unified notion of gay identity or culture. This assertion is highly relevant to the various artists who have attempted to create alternative representations of gay or queer male identity and community in the comic strips this study is concerned with.

Foucault sees modern subjectivity as a discursive construction and an effect of the networks of power, but he does not see power as solely a repressive force. He suggests that power takes hold because it does *not* solely deny freedoms, but also because it "produces things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be seen as a productive network which runs through the entire social body."[117] Power and the effects it produces are "exercised from innumerable points"[118] to no predetermined effect; power is not *only* repressive, but simultaneously a generative and enabling force: "Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."[119] Both power and resistance are multiple and unstable, and circulate in discourse. Discourse, too, is "neither uniform nor stable"[120] but rather a heterogeneous assortment of all the various utterances about a particular concept which, thereby, both construct *and contest* its meaning.

This understanding of power and discourse is exemplified in Foucault's discussion of the nineteenth-century construction of homosexuality as criminality and mental illness. While psychiatric and legal discourses at that

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[116] Seidman, "Identity Politics," 118.
[117] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1984), 61.
[118] Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 94.
[119] Ibid., 95.
[120] Ibid., 100.

time facilitated "a strong advance of social controls"[121] on a "deviant" sexuality, these repressive discourses "also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse,"[122] and, in Donald Hall's words, "became a rallying point for groups of individuals, who became self-aware and politicized through and in response to oppression."[123] As Foucault puts it, "homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf . . . often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified."[124] Such assertions of course have implications for discussing the attempts of newer generations of queers in the 1990s to distinguish themselves from the "gay mainstream," discursively constituting this distinction in and through expressions – music, film, and of course comics – produced from diverse "queer" positions in the cultural field. Moreover, as we shall see, the notion of reverse discourse is also relevant to the ways in which the comics medium itself has been critiqued for its supposed recommendation of "sexually abnormal" ideas. Queers' embrace of the comics form as a medium for exploring non-normative sexualities in a positive way can be seen as another example of reverse discourse.

In post-structuralist thought, knowledge is always understood as partial and incomplete, and concomitantly, subjectivity is also fragmented. As Tamsin Spargo describes, in Foucault's work,

> What we commonly or casually think of as the 'self' is, instead, regarded as a socially constructed fiction (albeit a serious one), as a product of language and of specific discourses linked to divisions of knowledge.[125]

The post-structuralist perspective on identity – as incoherent, unstable, and in flux – is a crucial component of queer theory's understanding of subjectivity, and underpins Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

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[121]Ibid., 101.
[122] Ibid., 101.
[123] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 66.
[124] Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 101.
[125] Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), 50.

Subversion of Identity, arguably the most important founding text of queer theory.

Judith Butler and Performativity

Published in 1990, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is frequently cited as queer theory's *ur*-text. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously develops the theory of gender performativity, arguing that feminism undermines its stated aims by understanding the category of "women" as universal and unified, and refusing to pay attention to the way feminism *itself* discursively constructs the subjects (individual women) whom it claims to represent.[126]

Feminism, along with gay politics, has tended to assume that the assertion of a collective identity and/or goals is a prerequisite for political intervention. However, such strategies "always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended,"[127] such as the exclusion of those who do not feel represented by feminism's definition of "women" or by the gay movement's definition of "gay people." Butler's critique of identity politics drives a project that seeks to denaturalize identity categories, and to question how identity, and thence politics, might be experienced differently. Butler seeks to demonstrate that "gender" does not follow from biological "sex" – neither one is "an abiding substance"[128] – and theorizes gender as *performative* – not as something one *is*, but as something one *does*, a sequence of reiterated speech and body acts.[129] The subject is compelled to repeat these acts "within a highly rigid regulatory frame"[130] – he or she is not free to choose which gender to enact, but constrained by social discourses. These reiterated acts "congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,"[131] but

[126] See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.
[127] Ibid., 8.
[128] Ibid., 32.
[129] See Ibid, 33.
[130] Ibid., 43.
[131] Ibid., 43-4.

there is in fact no authentic "core" to gender – it "is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[132]

If gender is a series of acts, it must be possible to "repeat" gender *differently*, in ways that might call into question that supposed "naturalness" of normative heterosexual identities and of "the regulatory practice of identity itself."[133] While Butler is interested in all such "subversive repetitions,"[134] the example she focuses on is drag, arguing that it "*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.*"[135] For Butler, the theatricality of drag provides an opportunity to denaturalize all heterosexual identities. Butler's theorizations challenge the homophobic assumption that drag queens and kings, butches and femmes are imitations of a heterosexual "real," which she instead figures as a parody with *no* original, a parody of a parody. Corber and Valocchi point out another implication of Butler's notion of "performativity": "Because lesbian and gay identities are no different from other identities, they cannot be understood as an expression of a core or 'true' self."[136]

Butler's ideas are – consciously or unconsciously – picked up on and explored in various ways in the comics I discuss. For example, Brad Rader's *Harry and Dickless Tom* and Jon Macy's surreal erotic comics portray bodies that deviate from the norm, which combine elements of both male and female, and question the authenticity of normative notions of gender. Some of Justin Hall's true sex stories question rigid sexual identity categories, showing that for some people sexuality is much more fluid. I discuss these erotic comics further in Chapter Six. Butler's theories are also relevant to David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*, and Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny*, which respectively focus on the experiences of a feminine, (proto)gay ten-year-old boy, and on the binary construction of identity in a surreal world populated by anthropomorphic foxes and rabbits. I discuss these comics in Chapter Seven. Butler and Foucault's

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[132] Ibid., 33.
[133]Ibid., 42.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 174.
[136] Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi, "Introduction," *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 4.

questioning of identity categories also has implications for those comics which do not necessarily challenge gender norms or sexual classifications in such a dramatic fashion, but which question the idea that there is a stable, unitary gay identity or one single, "authentic" way to "be gay". Such comics include the work of Robert Kirby, Nick Leonard and Michael Fahy, which I explore in Chapter Five. I now turn to a discussion of academic "queer theory," before discussing some of the challenges and criticisms aimed at queer theory from a variety of perspectives, including bisexual, transgender, and race politics and theory.

"Queer Theory"

The first high-profile use of the term "queer theory" was in a special issue of the feminist journal *differences* published in the summer of 1991, edited by Teresa de Lauretis and entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities." De Lauretis describes "queer" as an umbrella term which "juxtaposed to the 'lesbian and gay' of the subtitle, is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter, by now established and often convenient formula."[137] Other essays in this issue covered a variety of subjects, gesturing to the potential breadth of "queer" scholarly investigations. Indeed, queer theory quickly proliferated: conferences were held and "special" issues of journals appeared, as well as an array of books throughout the 1990s. As Hall observes, over a decade after its genesis, there is no queer theory singular, only "queer *theories*."[138]

Among the essays collected in *differences* was Sue-Ellen Case's "Tracking the Vampire." Case argues that queer theorization is less concerned with gender than it is with ontology, working "to shift the ground of being itself"[139] – resonating with the wider implications of Butler's project in *Gender Trouble*. Case takes the lesbian vampire as a metaphor for queer desires and practices, and as a figure that troubles heteronormative binary oppositions of

[137] Teresa De Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," *differences*, vol. 3, no. 2, iv.
[138] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 5.
[139] Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *differences*, vol. 3, no. 2, 3.

natural/unnatural, proper/improper, and life/death. In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner suggests that queer ought to be regarded as a strategic positionality, rather than an essential identity. Similarly to Case, "queer" for Warner represents a mandate of "more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal."[140] Queer "defin[es] itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual," and "point[s] out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence."[141]

David Halperin also claims in *Saint Foucault* that queer "is an identity without an essence" which "need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality."[142] For Halperin, as for Warner, queer "acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm" and "is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant."[143] Halperin describes queer as "a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices."[144]

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* is cited retrospectively as an important foundation for the then-embryonic field of queer theory. In the book's introduction, Sedgwick lamented the paucity of "respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with [the] self-evident fact" that *"People are different from each other."*[145] This can be seen as one of the foundational projects of queer theory – to start devising ways of thinking about how people are different from each other. This resonates with the intentions of many of the cartoonists discussed in this study, who seek to carve out a space for representing different kinds of queer identities.

In Sedgwick's later book *Tendencies*, she traced the etymology of the word "queer," defining it as meaning "*across* – it comes from the Indo-European root –

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[140] Michael Warner, "Introduction" in his, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.
[141] Ibid.
[142] David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 22.

twerkw, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English athwart."[146] For Sedgwick, the queer "is transitive – multiply transitive . . . it is relational, and strange."[147] Sedgwick's emphasis on transitivity is valuable in suggesting that, contrary to cultural binaries and polarizations, we all live with – as Hall puts it – "complex personalities, behaviors, desires, abilities and ambitions"[148] which cannot be neatly pigeonholed. Hall writes that to be queer might be understood "to abrade the classifications, to sit athwart conventional categories or traverse several."[149] In this sense, then, "queer" can be seen to resonate with an understanding of the comics medium as a hybrid cultural form which straddles the gaps between a number of traditionally polarized, cultural spheres: the verbal and the visual, the canonized and the debased, and the "high" and the "low." Sedgwick also suggests that the term "queer" might be understood as referring to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."[150] This notion has significance for a number of ways in which rigid definitions of identity can be complicated by a variety of factors, and hence for the various queer cartoonists intent on exploring and articulating their own idiosyncratic perspectives in comics where identity is represented as complex, abrasive, or mutable.

Critiques of Queer Theory

Queer theory has been critiqued on a number of fronts – for its exclusion and erasure of bisexual and transgender identities, for example, and its tendency to ignore race and class. Despite its inherent potential, the academic manifestation of "queer" has often tended to simply follow the broader norms of white, middle- and upper-class gay and lesbian culture, and in doing so has reflected

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[146] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), xii.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Hall, *Queer Theories*, 13.
[149] Ibid., 13.
[150] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.

and reinforced the disparities of gender, race, ethnicity and class in wider society. I explore these criticisms in further detail in this section, and discuss how the alternative comics genre provides a space for a range of different identities and experiences to be articulated.

Queer theory's emphasis on transitivity and the deconstruction of binaristic identity categories would seem to make it tailored for discussions of bisexual and transgender identities. Some scholars have understood bisexuality is the queer identity *par excellence* – Clare Hemmings, for example, theorizes the bisexual body as "a figure of subversion and disruption." [151] As Jonathan Dollimore puts it, bisexual desire crosses "what is perhaps the most fundamental binary organizing desire as exclusion, namely the homosexual/heterosexual divide."[152] Corber and Valocchi, too, see queer studies as "especially interested in . . . forms of identity . . . in which sex, gender, and sexuality do not line up in a socially proscribed way" such as "sadomasochism, transvestism and hermaphroditism."[153] Jagose also points to a number of articles written by critics defining themselves as "lesbian" or "bisexual" which, although written before the emergence of "queer theory" proper, nevertheless anticipated its questioning of rigid sexual identity categories and the "culturally dominant imperative to understand sexuality primarily in terms of sexual object choice."[154]

However, fairly quickly after the official inception of "queer theory," a number of transgender and bisexual theorists criticised the way queer theory tended to exclude these identities. Transgender critic Viviane K. Namaste, for example, argues that in queer theory the term "queer" is used essentially as a substitute for "lesbians and gay men," occluding the differences between various sexual and gender nonconformists and "privileg[ing] lesbian and gay

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[151] Clare Hemmings, "Resituating the Bisexual Body" in *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Politics,* ed. J. Bristow and A.R. Wilson (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), 131.
[152] Jonathan Dollimore, "Bisexuality" in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997), 253.
[153] Corber and Valocchi, "Introduction", 1.
[154] Jagose, Queer Theory, 69. Jagose especially points to Pat Califia, "Gay Men, Lesbians, and Sex: Doing It Together," Advocate (7 July 1983): 24-27; and Jan Clausen, "My Interesting Condition," *Out/Look: National Lesbian & Gay Quarterly* no. 7 (1990): 11-21.

male identities and politics even as [it] claims to remain 'open and flexible'."[155] Similarly, Stephen Angelides argues that bisexuality "has been curiously marginalized and erased from the deconstructive field of queer theory,"[156] while Naomi Tucker notes that "some people use 'queer' to hide their biphobia or discomfort with the word 'bisexual.'"[157]

Tucker's reservations about the potential despecification of "queer" resonate with the criticisms of queer theory made by gay men and lesbians of colour. Queer theory's interest in crossing borders and challenging assumptions about identity might make it seem particularly suited to investigating the ways in which sexual and gender identities intersect with racial, ethnic and class identities, but Gloria Andalzúa argues that queer "is used as a false unifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under" that "homogenizes, erases our differences."[158] Such critiques point up the fact that despite its inherent potential, queer academia has often tended to simply follow the broader norms of white, middle- and upper-class gay and lesbian culture, reflecting and reinforcing the disparities of race, ethnicity and class in wider society.

Ian Barnard argues that the figure of "the homosexual" has been "whitewashed" not only within "gay community" discourses, but also in queer activism and theory. The "fantasized gay community" represented in supposedly "positive" media discourses, says Barnard, is composed of an elite group of white lesbians and gay men "who are criminally ignorant of or systematically ignoring"[159] working class queers and queers of colour,[160] while queer political organizations and queer academia all tend to be "white-centred and white-

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[155] Viviane K. Namaste, "The Use and Abuse of Queer Tropes: Metaphor and Catachresis in Queer Theory and Politics," *Social Semiotics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1999), 232.
[156] Stephen Angelides, *History of Bisexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 163.
[157] Naomi Tucker, "Introduction" in her, ed., *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, and Visions* (New York and London: Harrington Park Press, 1995), 4. See also Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore, eds., *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); and Merl Storr, ed., *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
[158] Gloria Andalzúa, "To(o) Queer the Writer: Loca, Escrita y Chicana," in *InVersions: Writing by Dykes, Queers and Lesbians*, ed. Betsy Warland (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1991), 250.
[159] Ian Barnard, "Queer Race," *Social Semiotics*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1999, 201.
[160] Ibid.

dominated."[161] José Esteban Muñoz argues, similarly, that "[t]he field of queer theory . . . is . . . a place where a scholar of color can be lost in an immersion of vanilla while her or his critical faculties can be frozen by an avalanche of snow."[162]

Robert F. Reid-Pharr issues a further challenge to the race norms of queer theory and cultural production, asking why "we see so little work by white gays and lesbians that directly addresses the question of cross-racial desire?"[163] This seeming reluctance or disinterest is related to "the way in which . . . admitting to the reality of beauty that is other than white, throws into disarray the idea of whiteness as universal."[164] Reid-Pharr's call to multiply and complicate universal notions of white beauty also destabilizes the encoding of homosexuality as universally white. Furthermore, it urges us to critically examine *all* representations of "gay and lesbian" *and* "queer" communities and cultures as unified or singular.

Queer alternative comics have certainly proved to be a space where both bisexual and, more recently, transgender artists create their own cultural discourses. Although the majority of cartoonists discussed in this thesis do not identify as bisexual, many of them, as previously mentioned, include representations of sexual and gender fluidity in their work. Other cartoonists who have dealt with bisexuality more directly include Roberta Gregory, particularly in her series *Artistic Licentiousness*,[165] and Leanne Franson in her *Liliane* comics,[166] and Northwest Press recently published a collection titled *Anything That Loves: Comics Beyond "Gay" and "Straight"* devoted to both more established and up-and-coming cartoonists exploring bisexual identities and experiences.[167] Transgender issues have also started to be explored by both trans cartoonists and cisgender cartoonists interested in trans issues, including

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[161] Ibid.
[162] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
[163] Ibid., 97.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Roberta Gregory, *Artistic Licentiousness* no. 1-3 (Seattle, WA: Starhead Comix, 1991).
[166] Franson's *Liliane* comics have been collected in various volumes including Leanne Franson, *Assume Nothing: Evolution of a Bi-Dyke starring Liliane* (Brighton: Slab-O-Concrete, 2000).
[167] Charles "Zan" Christensen, ed., *Anything That Loves: Comics Beyond "Gay" and "Straight"* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2013).

Dylan Edwards' *Transposes*,[168] and the writer-artist team of Tristan Crane and Ted Naifeh's *How Loathsome*.[169]

It remains relatively rare to find non-white queer artists creating comics about varied non-white queer experiences. Some white queer cartoonists have included representations of non-white queers within their work, most notably Robert Kirby and Alison Bechdel in *Curbside* and *Dykes to Watch Out For*, respectively. Latino queer cartoonist Ivan Velez Jr.'s series *Tales of the Closet*[170] featured a racially diverse cast; the comics in Jaime Cortez's queer Latino/a zine *A La Brava*[171] focused very directly on the Latin American queer experience; and Victor Hodge's soap opera comic *Black Gay Boy Fantasy*[172] had an all-Black, queer cast. African-American erotic artist Belasco focuses on Black men, too, in his erotic comic *The Brothers of New Essex*.[173] More recently, Jennifer Camper has edited a queer anthology comic *Juicy Mother*; in the introduction, she asks "Where are the comix for me, a Lebanese-American dyke? . . . Where are the comix by and about women, people of color and queers?"[174] With the demise of many zines and independent comics anthologies, there are few venues left for these stories to be published.

Having discussed critiques of queer theory, I consider two other strands in queer theory that have emerged strongly in the early twenty-first century. In the next section, I discuss what is sometimes referred to as anti-social or anti-relational queer theory, and the "negative" emotions often associated with it, such as anger, shame, and pain – feelings that are often articulated in different ways in the comics I discuss. In the section that follows, I explore queer theory's focus on archives and on feelings and emotions, and argue that queer comics are political not because they expound any specific political agenda, but because

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[168] Dylan Edwards, *Transposes* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2013).
[169] Tristan Crane and Ted Naifeh, *How Loathsome* (New York: NBM/Comics Lit, 2004).
[170] Ivan Velez Jr., *Tales of the Closet* no. 1-9 (New York: Hetrick-Martin Institute, Summer/Fall 1987-Summer 1993).
[171] Jaime Cortez, *A La Brava* no. 1-4 (San Francisco, CA: Self-published, 1996-1997).
[172] Victor Hodge, *Black Gay Boy Fantasy* no. 1-26 (Washington, DC: Self-published, 1998-2011).
[173] Belasco, *The Brothers of New Essex: Afro-Erotic Adventures* (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2001).
[174] Jennifer Camper, "Introduction" in her, ed., *Juicy Mother* no. 1 (Brooklyn, New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 7.

of the way they can be said to archive a range of queer emotions from "negative" feelings to more joyous or pleasurable emotions.

Anti-social and Anti-relational Queer Theory

The anti-social or anti-relational turn in queer theory has emerged with some force in the twenty-first century. In an essay titled "Do You Want Queer Theory (Or Do You Want The Truth)?" Tavia Nyong'o writes that the anti-relational project has its roots in the gay liberationist writings of Guy Hocquenghem in the 1970s, but Leo Bersani's work – especially his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and his later book *Homos* – and Lee Edelman's *No Future* extend and expand on the notion of the anti-relational or anti-social. As Nyong'o writes, such theory "[t]actically embrac[es] the seemingly homophobic charge that 'homosexual desire' subverts the reproduction of the social order" and rejects "proposals to articulate alternative models of queer sociality, community, and utopia," aiming instead to "liberate queers from the normalizing effects of all such progressive and inclusionary ambitions and to instead proclaim a queer radicalism located outside politics as conventionally conceived, perhaps even outside of politics."[175]

In "Is the Rectum a Grave?" champions "the inestimable value of sex as . . . anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving,"[176] and in his later book *Homos*, argues that an anti-relational approach to sexual relations constitutes "a political threat . . . because of the energies it releases, energies made available for the unprecedented projects of human organization."[177] For Bersani, homosexual male sex involves a "self-shattering,"[178] and thus a loss of the "self" that is "the precondition for registration and service as a citizen."[179] As I discuss in Chapter Six, Bersani's ideas chime in different ways with the comics work of Jon Macy, who in his erotic comics portrays queer sex as disruptive of

[175] Nyong'o, Tavia, "Do You Want Queer Theory (Or Do You Want The Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s," *Radical History Review*, no. 100, Winter 2008, 104.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid., 123.
[178] Ibid., 101.
[179] Ibid., 125.

identity, although he does not recommend anti-relationality in the ways in which Bersani does.

As José Muñoz writes, Bersani's interesting critiques of relational queer theories are ultimately problematic, leading to "a critique of coalitional politics."[180] The limits of Bersani's project "are most obvious when one tries to imagine actual political interventions into the social realm, especially interventions that challenge the tedious white normativity that characterizes most of North American gay male culture."[181] However, as Muñoz points out, many queer critics followed Bersani's anti-relational turn, "but arguably none as successfully as Lee Edelman in his book *No Future*."[182] For Edelman, the figure of "the Child whose innocence solicits our defense"[183] frames political debate restrictively, in terms defined by what he calls "reproductive futurism."[184] For Edelman, queerness "names the side of those not 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute power of reproductive futurism."[185]

In the 2008 essay "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies" Judith Halberstam provides an overview of other anti-social or negative queer projects, but is critical of the apolitical nature of Edelman's critique, arguing that an anti-relational and negative politics that could embrace "Dyke anger, anti-colonial despair, racial rage, counter-hegemonic violences, punk pugilism," and suggesting "it is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed."[186]

Anti-relational theorization, as suggested by Halberstam's quote above, is tied up with various feelings and affects – anger, rage, despair. As Michael Snediker points out in his book *Queer Optimism*, such negative affects, as well as "[m]elancholy, self-shattering, shame, the death drive," what he calls "this queer-pessimistic constellation," have "dominated and organized much of queer

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[180] Ibid., 34-5.
[181] Ibid., 35.
[182] Ibid.,11.
[183] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004, 2.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid., 3.
[186] Ibid., 152.

theoretical discourse" at the expense of positive affects such as happiness, hope, optimism and utopianism.[187] Tied to the anti-relational turn, then, is the recent turn to affect in queer studies. In Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*[188] and Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, [189] these writers in different ways explore the ways in which feelings are important in attaching individuals to social norms. Ahmed develops these ideas further in *The Promise of Happiness*.[190] I engage with her theories in Chapter Six to discuss the ways in which cartoonists like Jon Macy develop complex erotic protagonists who can display a wide range of emotions, both "positive" and "negative."

Other queer theorists while not entirely abandoning the negative, have taken a somewhat different approach. For example, in *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick seeks to challenge a "hermeneutics of suspicion"[191] that has become dominant within queer theory, concerned with deciding how liberating or oppressive texts are, and replacing it with reparative practices and ways of knowing that emphasize pleasure, joy, and hope. Queer alternative comics that challenge both homophobia and mainstream gay identities, and make space for alternative narratives of queer experiences, can be seen as engaged in reparative practices, seeking, in Sedgwick's words, to "confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."[192]

Sedgwick's emphasis on hope and reparative practices is picked up on by José Esteban Muñoz, who in *Cruising Utopia* argues that queerness is not oppositional to futurity as Edelman claims, but is in fact "*primarily* about futurity and hope" because "queerness is always in the horizon."[193] Queerness is "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity,"[194] suggesting the importance of the archive – an emotional archive of memories – to his project of

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[187] Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4.
[188] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
[189] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[190] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
[191] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.
[192] Ibid., 149.
[193] Muñoz, *Cruising*, 11. My emphasis.
[194] Ibid., 16.

"queer world-making," which he regards as a utopian endeavour: "Utopia lets us imagine a space outside heteronormativity."[195] Memories and their ritualized retellings through writing, performance, film, video, and visual culture – and implicitly comics – have "world-making potentialities"; for Muñoz, such "queer utopian remembrances" can "help us carve out a space for actual, living sexual citizenship."[196]

The anti-relational or negative politics of much queer theory resonates with the themes of many of the comics discussed in this study. The emotions indexed in these comics are not always strictly "positive" or "happy" ones. Across a range of different comics from the slice-of-life stories of Robert Kirby and Michael Fahy to the dark surreal pornography of Brad Rader and Jon Macy, we find melancholy, loneliness, sadness, anger, jealousy, betrayal, and a sense of alienation. However, these comics also archive feelings of joy, love, friendship, connectedness, and hope; these comics are emotionally multi-dimensional. Furthermore, the queer comics I explore here do not cleave to an explicit anti-relational theory or negative politics in the sense expounded by Bersani, Edelman or Halberstam, and as discussed above. The majority of cartoonists I interviewed, while far from apolitical, tended to balk at the notion of their comics "towing the line" of any form of politics whether conceived of as "gay" or "queer." However, these comics are nevertheless political because of the way that they can be said to archive a complex, multi-dimensional range of queer emotions, not reducible either to a communitarian positivity or to a radical queer negativity. It is to the notion of queer archives of feelings that I now turn.

Queer Archives and Feelings

In his article "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" José Muñoz argues that the evidence of queer archives tends to be ephemeral,

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[195] Ibid., 35.
[196] Ibid., 35. For a similar discussion of utopianism and queer world-making see Donald E. Hall, *Reading Sexualities: Hermeneutic Theory and the Future of Queer Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

queerness being so "often transmitted covertly" and existing as "innuendo, gossips, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted by those within its epistemological sphere – while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility."[197] Muñoz's later book *Disidentifications* begins the work of creating such an archive of the ephemeral, focused on queer performance.[198]

In her book *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich looks at a range of cultural texts, from oral histories to performance art to rock music, as "archives of feelings," that is, as "repositories of feelings and emotions," encoded in both the texts *and* "in the practices that surround their production and reception."[199] Cvetkovich is particularly interested in feelings of trauma and distress, negative feelings that are often seen as unspeakable or unrepresentable; trauma challenges conventional forms of documentation and memorialization, demanding "an unusual archive, whose materials . . . are themselves frequently ephemeral"[200] and often include personal memories. Though Cvetkovich makes no specific mention of comics in her book, a later essay published is devoted to an analysis of successful lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home*, which she describes as a drawn archive. Cvetkovich sees *Fun Home*'s "narrative of family life with a father who is attracted to adolescent boys" as "a welcome alternative to public discourses about LGBTQ politics that are increasingly homonormative and dedicated to family values."[201]

The queer comics I discuss in this thesis are intensely personal, important efforts to document queer lives and cultures that can be understood as constituting what Ann Cvetkovich has called, "an archive of feelings." These comics are repositories for queer emotions, relationships, and sexual fantasies, for feelings of pleasure, joy, and connectedness, but also of alienation, trauma

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[197] José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 8:2, 1996, 6.
[198] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[199] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Ann Cvetkovich, "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's Fun Home," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2008), 111.

and distress. Cvetkovich argues that archiving such complex emotions "serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures."[202] Queer comics are hybrid, multi-layered archives that preserve a variety of queer experiences and emotions in a combination of drawings and words. Such graphic archives preserve queer cartoonists' experiences of community, sex, intimacy and alienation, and present an alternative to more familiar regimes of gay male representations in the mainstream gay media and public sphere.

While Cvetkovich, like many queer theorists, seems particularly interested in more negative affects and emotions, I argue that queer comics preserve a greater variety of queer experiences and emotions in a combination of drawings and words than terms like "trauma" or "shame" allow. Judith Halberstam also writes about queer archives, suggesting that an archive of queer subcultures would ideally preserve not only temporary artefacts such as queer zines, but also interviews that reveal "the self-understandings of cultural producers."[203] By including interview material throughout this thesis I aim to do just that.

Part 3: Comics Studies

In 1988, the cartoonist Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus*, claimed that comics "fly below critical radar."[204] In this section, I will demonstrate that, until recently, there has been a noticeable shortage of sophisticated studies of comics, in comparison to similar studies on other popular forms such as cinema, television, and popular fiction. When comics have received critical attention, this has been overwhelmingly negative; over the past century, the majority of academic and popular analyses of comics have been tinged by ambivalence and disdain. At times, the comics medium has managed to unite left-wing reformers and right-wing censors, who attacked the "low-brow" comic book as,

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[202] Cvetkovich, *Archive*, 10.
[203] Ibid., 169.
[204] Art Spiegelman, interviewed on *The Late Show*, BBC2, 12 October, 1988.

respectively, a bearer of dominant capitalist ideology, or as an invitation to delinquency and depravity.

Roger Sabin's 1993 book *Adult Comics: An Introduction* provides an in-depth look at the history of comics in Britain and America, and was one of the first studies to treat adult comics seriously within cultural studies. Sabin cautiously notes that "comics are beginning to be taken seriously" and to be studied in literature and cultural studies courses "at every level."[205] Writing more recently, Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* paints a more optimistic picture, claiming that the emergence of "artistically ambitious graphic novels has led to salutary changes in the critical environment" and that comics are "[a]t last . . . being recognized as a literary and artistic form deserving of sustained attention."[206] However, the comics medium continues to be shadowed by the dismissive and often outright hostile criticism it has attracted over the past century, and attitudes that have been informed by a number of different discourses and that relate to the formal qualities of comics, to their means of production and distribution, and to their content.

First, comics are often considered bad because their hybrid visual/verbal aspect makes them inauthentic and inferior both as literature and as visual art. As Nop Maas explains in his essay "The Archaeology of the Dutch Comic Strip," this polarization of visual art and literature (and their respective "proper applications") was crystallized in the German poet and art theorist G.E. Lessing's "Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry" written in 1776. According to Lessing "a good image needs no explanation and must speak for itself," and this has informed the view that the comics medium is guilty of an "*incestuous mixing of the arts.*"[207] Indeed, as Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Diereck

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[205] Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.
[206] Hatfield, *Alternative,* xi.
[207] Nop Maas, "The Archaeology of the Dutch Comic Strip," in *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Diereck (Brussels: VUB University Press, 1998), 77. Italics in original.

put it, the comics form "is still largely regarded as a bastard medium, combining two different languages."[208]

Second, comics are considered bad because they are seen to depend more on pictures than on words to communicate, and this is dangerous for a number of reasons. As Mila Bongco describes in her study *Reading Comics*, the written word "is seen as offering free play to the imagination,"[209] whereas it is believed that images cannot communicate complex, deep ideas. Therefore, comics "spoil" their readers for better literature, conditioning them to be passive and "lazy," semi-literate, and more susceptible to suggestion.

Third, comics are considered bad because, as mechanically reproduced, mass-distributed commodities characterized by standardised production and consumption, they cannot be authentic "art", nor can they be complex enough to give space for individual interpretation. This objection is particularly associated with the Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass culture, which was influential on American radicals such as Clement Greenberg[210] and Dwight MacDonald[211] in the 1940s and 1950s. MacDonald, for example, groups comic books with radio, the movies, jazz music, science fiction and detective stories, describing them all as "mass culture" and characterizing these different forms as being "like chewing gum" in that they are "solely and directly" intended "for mass consumption."[212] He opposes such mass culture products to the authentic artistic creations of the avant-garde, which he warns is dying, "suffocated by the competing Mass Culture, where it is not being absorbed into it."[213] Similarly, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who penned the first serious critique of comics, *Seduction of the Innocent*, shared MacDonald's attitude, declaring that even when comic books adapted "high culture" – for example, in comic book adaptations of Shakespeare plays – it was corrupted by

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[208] Lefèvre and Diereck, *Forging a New Medium*, 20.
[209] Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, New York: Garland, 2000, 22.
[210] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review*, 6:5 (1939), 34-49.
[211] Dwight MacDonald, "Masscult and Midcult" in his *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1952).
[212] Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture" in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 59.
[213] Ibid., 71.

the commercialized comics form: "*Corruptu optimi pessimi*. Freely translated: the comic book version of the best is the worst."[214]

Finally, comics are often claimed to be bad because of their content – because of their depiction of crime, violence and sex – which is presented visually *and* mediated via mass culture, and therefore, can do nothing less than debase their consumers. Comics as we know them today have existed in both Britain and the United States since roughly the end of the nineteenth century, and were originally predominantly aimed at a working class readership. From the beginning, comics drew criticism from middle-class paternalists who were especially concerned that "working-class literacy and educational standards were at stake," arguing that "working men and women should be encouraged instead to read 'improving literature'," that is, texts without illustrations.[215] In America, comic strips originally appeared in daily newspapers in the 1890s, and by 1900 they were typically being printed in full-colour, Sunday pull-out supplements in most newspapers.[216] Their popularity "was considered by some a national outrage."[217] Because newspaper tycoons such as Hearst and Pulitzer were "using the strips to reach an ever-wider (often immigrant) audience, they were branded as 'low class' and accused of 'dragging the press down'."[218]

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the gradual standardization of humorous newspaper comic strips into situation comedies, as well as the emergence of a new genre, the adventure strip. In the 1930s American newspaper strips were immensely popular, "nothing less than a national institution."[219] American comic books as we know them today evolved from the newspaper strips. The publication of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 ushered in the first major boom in American comics history, as well as "set[ting] the definition

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[214] Fredric Wertham in *Saturday Review of Literature*, 2 September, 1950, quoted in Martin Barker, "Fredric Wertham – The Sad Case of the Unhappy Humanist," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John A. Lent (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 218.
[215] Ibid., 21-22.
[216] Ibid., 134.
[217] Ibid., 137.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid., 139.

of a comic thereafter as quintessentially juvenile."[220]Adam Gopnik points out the difference between the way that comic strips and comic books were understood in America: Comic strips, "like the movies, were a public and ceremonial form . . . They had a place" – albeit a lowly one – "in the hierarchy."[221] By contrast, the comic book "was in its very nature outside parental control" and "it had overtones, always, of the secretive, the menacing, and the faintly masturbatory."[222]

A handful of books containing biographical sketches and interviews with cartoonists, and histories of the comic strip appeared throughout the 1930s and into the 1950s.[223] However, the first serious study of comics was not a history or an exploration of comics art, but a damning attack on the medium and an indictment of the comic book's alleged pernicious influence on children – Fredric Wertham's notorious *Seduction of the Innocent,* published in 1954.

Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*

In her book *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, Amy Kiste Nyberg documents the history of the 1950s moral panics around the American comic book.[224] In the early 1950s, noted psychiatrist Fredric Wertham led a crusade against comic books that won support from parents' groups, religious groups, and school organisations in America. Various scholars have questioned the reliability of Wertham's highly personal and impressionistic research methods,[225] but his crusade against comics resulted, in the spring of 1954, in

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[220] Ibid., 144-145.
[221] Adam Gopnik, "Comics," in *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, eds. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 182.
[222] Ibid.
[223] See W.A. Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humor* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Martin Sheridan, *Comics and their Creators: Life Stories of American Cartoonists* (Boston: Hale, Cushman and Flint, 1942); Waugh, Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); Stephen Becker, *Comic Art in America: A Social History of the Funnies, the Political Cartoons, Magazine Humor, Sporting Cartoons, and Animated Cartoons* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).
[224] Nyberg, Amy Kiste, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).
[225] See Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), esp. Ch. 6, "Fredric Wertham's Nightmare", 56-70; James Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. Ch. 6, "Crusade Against Mass Culture," 91-108.

the public forum of Senate hearings into possible links between comic books and juvenile delinquency. The same year saw the publication of Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book invoked in the majority of histories as the comics fan/scholar's *bête noire*. Sabin even describes the book as Wertham's "*Mein Kampf* of comics."[226]

Seduction of the Innocent is a distillation of all the different negative discourses about comics discussed above. For Wertham, the heavily visual form of comics is so highly charged as to be irresistible to children; its mixing of words with pictures is "an invitation to illiteracy,"[227] encouraging a "lazy" approach to reading that triggered or exacerbated reading disorders. While reading comics leads most often to "passivity and daydreams," where it does result in activity, "the actions are never constructive" but "can only be masturbatory or delinquent."[228]

In *Seduction*, Wertham also links reading comic books to the sexual development of children, devoting a whole chapter to the ways in which comic books suggest "sexually abnormal ideas."[229] While his main concern is focused around depictions of sexual violence against women, towards the end of the chapter, Wertham moves on to his discussion of "the homoerotically tinged type of comic book"[230] with its notorious interpretation of a homoerotic relationship between Batman and Robin. As Wertham describes, his own study was prompted by the testimonies of young homosexual men being treated at the Quaker Emergency Service Readjustment Center, whose own sexual fantasies had been drawn from the pages of Batman comics.[231] As Will Brooker notes in his book *Batman Unmasked*, the reaction of both comic fans and historians toward Wertham has been "almost universally negative."[232] Heterosexual commentators "frequently mobiliz[e] a . . . homophobic prejudice in their efforts to decry" Wertham's reading of Batman and Robin's relationship, while queer

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[226] Sabin, *Adult*, 157.
[227] Wertham, *Seduction*, 118.
[228] Ibid., 117.
[229] Ibid., 118.
[230] Ibid., 189.
[231] Ibid., 191.
[232] Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York and London: Continuum), 2001, 101.

critics "attack Wertham for his own supposed homophobia."[233] The best-known example of the latter tendency is Andy Medhurst's essay "Batman, Deviance and Camp."[234]

Brooker, however, argues that Wertham's "highlighting of a few boys' homoerotic interpretation" actually caused this reading to circulate rather than repressing it.[235] The "queer reading" made visible by Wertham "has also been taken up by gay audiences in a less condemnatory social context, and in turn has been incorporated by the producers of mainstream Batman films and comic books into scenarios of love and trust between men."[236] In a case of Foucauldian "perverse implantation," then, these queer subtexts, brought to public light by Wertham's concerns, were able to proliferate.

Brooker highlights the parallels between the discourses about homosexuality and about comic books during the 1940s and early 1950s, the period of Wertham's primary campaign. In an editorial in the December 1948 issue of the *National Education Association Journal*, Joy Elmer Morgan described comics in terms of "indecency" and "the perversion of the child mind."[237] Strikingly similar phrases could equally be found in discussions of homosexuality during the 1940s and 1950s, and indeed more recently. And as Brooker points out, "What Parents Don't Know," the title of Wertham's 1953 essay in the *Ladies Home Journal*, "could quite easily refer to a son or daughter being gay, rather than to the danger of comic books."[238]

In his introduction to the 1989 collection *Gay Comics*, cartoonist Robert Triptow makes the observation that "[t]here are a lot of similarities between comics fandom and the gay subculture," noting that "the average gay person" and "the average comics reader" are both "acquainted with the oppression of conformist society," as both gay lifestyles and cartooning are "looked down

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[233] Ibid., 101-102.
[234] Andy Medhurst, "Batman, Deviance and Camp," in *The Many Lives of Batman*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (London: Routledge, 1991), 149-163.
[235] Ibid., 102-103.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid., 119.
[238] Ibid.

upon as (at best) trivial and self indulgent."[239] Triptow thus raises the possibility of a "homology" between queer subcultures and the comics medium – a term cultural theorist Paul Willis uses to describe the structural "correspondences, the similarities of internal relation"[240] between the values, feelings and lifestyles of subcultural participants, and the cultural artefacts and objects that they use in order to express and reinforce their primary values. From the late nineteenth century, as I have discussed, the comics medium was seen as inferior "low" culture, and by the mid-1950s, it was associated strongly with deviance and immorality and, in Paul Willis's words, "rich in absorbed, highly appropriate social meanings"[241] that resonated with queer subcultural lives. The emergence of gay-themed comics from the 1960s onwards can be seen as evidence of such an association, and as an example of Foucauldian reverse-discourse: whereas in Wertham's study and others, comics were criticized for their emphasis on "abnormal" sex, the comics that appeared in gay magazines and later in the undergrounds, in the 1960s and 1970s, embraced the open depiction of "deviant" sexuality in a positive light.

The Comics Code and After

In this section I will briefly cover the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954, and its detrimental effects on the medium; the emergence of underground comics in the 1960s, which would later lead to flowering of alternative comics in the 1980s and 1990s; and the slow emergence of serious scholarship on comics, including the impact of Scott McCloud's highly influential *Understanding Comics*, published in 1993. I will then go on to discuss scholarship on comics style, and the relevance of this to LGBT comics genres.

The Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency was organized in 1953, and conducted its investigation of the comic book industry

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[239] Robert Triptow, "Art + Humor = Liberation" in *Gay Comics*, New York: Plume, 4.
[240] Paul Willis, "Symbolism and Practice: A Theory for the Social Meaning of Pop Music," Occasional Paper (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1974), 11.
[241] Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London, Henley & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 66.

in the spring of 1954. Ultimately, the controversy of the Senate hearings prompted a number of comics publishers to establish the Comics Code Authority. The Code forbade "violence, sex and, significantly, anti-establishment messages in comics," and outlawed "the distribution of any title not bearing a Code seal of approval."[242] Academic researchers and fan-historians tend to agree that the Code forced "the industry . . . into a steep decline" during the 1950s and 1960s, as "comics content was sanitized, homogenized and essentially juvenilised."[243] However, the so-called "underground" comics emerged in America in the mid-1960s and 1970s, and this period also witnessed the rise of comics fandom and the specialist comic shop network in America, with events in Britain "follow[ing] a very similar pattern with only a short time-lag."[244]

A number of books on comics emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s, mainly surveys and histories of the newspaper strips or mainstream comic books, although some did make mention of the undergrounds.[245] There were few serious, in-depth analyses of comics, however, and those that did appear during the 1970s and early 1980s maintained the traditional focus on the ostensible effects comics had on their readers, rather than looking at comics as an expressive form worthy of analysis in its own right. Invariably, the effects of comics continued to be conceived of by critics as being wholly negative, and comics readers as especially vulnerable to ideological coercion. Examples of this critical tendency include Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, which provides an

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[242] Sabin, *Adult*, 31.
[243] Ibid., 163.
[244] Ibid., 68. For a detailed history of underground comics see James Mark Estren, *A History of Underground Comics*, 3rd ed. (California: Straight Arrow Books, 1974; California: Ronin Publishing, 1993); and Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008).
[245] See David Manning White and Robert H. Abel, *The Funnies: An American Idiom* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963); George Perry and Alan Aldridge, *The Penguin Book of Comics*, rev. ed. (1967; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn, eds., *A History of the Comic Strip* (France 1967; New York: Crown, 1968); Jim Steranko, *The Steranko History of Comics*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Pennsylvania: Supergraphics, 1970 and 1972); Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971); Judith O'Sullivan, *The Art of the Comic Strip* (Maryland: University of Maryland, 1971); Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium* (Germany 1971; London: Studio Vista, 1972); Jerry Robinson, *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (New York; G. Puttnam's Sons, 1974).

ideological analysis of Walt Disney comic books from a Marxist perspective,[246] and Angela McRobbie's feminist critiques of *Jackie*, the British magazine aimed at teenage girls.[247]

The conventional perception of comics as juvenile pap devoid of artistic merit was somewhat dented by the emergence of adult-oriented "alternative comics" in the early 1980s, and the rise of alternative comics publishing houses such as Fantagraphics and Drawn & Quarterly. Mainstream American publishers Marvel and DC were also influenced by the rise of alternative comics aimed at adults, and started to publish comics with more mature, "edgy" themes.[248] Though in many ways inspired by the underground comics, as Hatfield argues, "alternative comics cultivated a more considered approach to the art form, less dependent on the outrageous gouging of taboos (though that continued too, of course) and more open to the possibility of extended and ambitious narratives."[249] The recent "growth in comic study is reflected in, and has been much affected by, the increasing self-awareness of practitioners."[250] As Joseph Witek describes in his invaluable summary of comics criticism in the United States, the first "full-length consideration of the techniques of comics narrative was undertaken by the veteran cartoonist Will Eisner in his *Comics & Sequential Art*."[251] In this book and the follow-up *Graphic Storytelling*, Eisner used his own comic strips as examples in order to discuss comics "as a valid form of reading,"[252] discussing the varieties of panel transitions, the use of lettering and sound effects, and page composition to demonstrate that comics have a vocabulary and grammar in both prose and illustration.

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[246] Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. by David Kunzle, rev. English ed. (1971; New York: International General, 1984).
[247] Angela McRobbie, "*Jackie*: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity," Occasional Paper (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1978), and Angela McRobbie, "Just Like a *Jackie* Story" in *Feminism for Girls: An Adventure Story*, ed. Angela McRobbie and Trisha McCabe (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 113-128.
[248] Sabin, *Adult*, 77.
[249] Hatfield, *Alternative*, x.
[250] Ibid., xi.
[251] Josef Witek, "Comics Criticism in the United States: A Brief Critical Introduction," *International Journal of Comics Art*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 1999), 14.
[252] Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Expanded ed. (1985; Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1990), 7.

A smattering of scholarly works began to appear around this time that took comics seriously, such as Witek's *Comic Books as History*,[253] and Inge's *Comics as Culture*.[254] Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, various histories, reference works, analyses of comics, textbooks, readers,[255] and academic journals[256] devoted to comics, have slowly emerged, many of which I have already cited in this survey. Those I have not yet cited include studies focusing on the fans and audiences of comics;[257] on various under-researched moments in comics publishing history;[258] and on Japanese *manga*,[259] amongst various other topics. For the most part, these works have tended to focus on mainstream comics rather than independent or alternative ones, and have not dealt with LGBT themes in comics in much depth, and so are of limited usefulness to the current project.

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[253] Josef Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).
[254] M. Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990).
[255] Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, ed., *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009).
[256] The English-language journals devoted to comics at the time of writing include *The Comics Journal*, *The International Journal of Comic Art*, and *Studies in Comics*.
[257] See Martin Barker, "Seeing How Far You Can See: On Being a 'Fan' of 2000 AD," in *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media*, ed. David Buckingham (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 159-183; Jeffrey A. Brown, "Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1997), 13-31; Jonathan D. Tankel and Keith Murphy, "Collecting Comic Books: A Study of the Fan and Curatorial Consumption," in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, eds. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1998), 53-66; Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 1999; Bill Schelly, *The Golden Age of Comic Fandom* (WA: Hamster Press, 1999); and Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).
[258] See William W. Savage, Jr., *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (1998; Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990); Stephen Sennitt, *Ghastly Terror: The Horrible Story of the Horror Comics* (Manchester: Critical Vision/Headpress, 1999); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001); Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Ronin Ro, *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2004); and Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury, *Great British Comics* (London: Aurum Press, 2006); David Hadju, *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Picador, 2009); Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).
[259] See Frederick L. Schodt, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (New York: Kodansha International, 1983); Frederick L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 1996); Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (London and New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2000); and Paul Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Laurence King, 2004).

No single work has been as influential on the development of a critical vocabulary for the comics medium as Scott McCloud's highly influential *Understanding Comics*. As Varnum and Gibbons point out, McCloud's book "may have prompted more scholarly discussion on comics than any other book in the English language."[260] *Understanding Comics* has been hotly debated by comics scholars. In April 1999 for example, *The Comics Journal* devoted almost fifty pages to a number of essays by various critics, on different aspects of McCloud's theories.[261] As Hatfield describes, the book has been criticized by university-based researchers because McCloud's ambitious scope is not matched by "academic discipline" even though "*Understanding Comics*, of necessity, is not an academic treatise"; instead, McCloud's book fills "an enormous vacuum" in "the popular recognition of comics as an art-form" in English-speaking countries.[262]

McCloud's book begins with a discussion of definitions and origins, and defines both "sequential art" and "comics" as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."[263] McCloud's definition excludes single-panel cartoons from the category "comics," instead classifying these as a separate – but related – medium.[264]

As Witek describes, McCloud differs from Eisner in his wider frame of reference and "his more methodical . . . categorization of narrative techniques."[265] While Eisner mentions the importance of panel transitions and the relationships between words and images, McCloud furnishes us with different categories of panel transitions and word/image combinations. Witek observes that the contemporary discourse on comics has, inarguably, been enriched by McCloud's stimulus to discussion and by his formulation of "the

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[260] Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, "Introduction," in their ed., *The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xiii.
[261] See Bart Beaty, ed., "Critical Focus: Understanding Comics," *The Comics Journal*, No. 211 (April 1999), 57-103.
[262] Charles Hatfield, "Thoughts on Understanding Comics," *The Comics Journal*, No. 211, April 1999, 88.
[263] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 9. For a critique of McCloud's emphasis on definitions and origins see Samuel R. Delany, "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism" in his *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 218-270.
[264] Ibid., 21.
[265] Witek, "Comics Criticism," 15.

vocabulary needed to look closely at the specific ways comics make their meanings" and "much subsequent critical discourse . . . has adopted McCloud's terms for narrative techniques."[266]

One of the most important contributions McCloud makes to comics analysis is his discussion of "the gutter," the blank space between the panels in a comics narrative, and the connected idea of "closure," or narrative comprehension and cohesion. For McCloud, comics is a medium "where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of *change*, time and *motion*."[267] In "the gutter," the blank space between the panels, the reader is "allow[ed] . . . to *connect*" the various, seemingly disconnected moments presented in successive comics panels "and *mentally construct* a *continuous, unified reality*."[268] Readers draw on past experience and deductive reasoning in order to fill in the gaps in the information provided for us. McCloud argues that "the reader's *deliberate, voluntary closure* is comics' *primary* means of simulating *time and motion.*"[269] McCloud also suggests tools for thinking about the variety of visual styles used by comics creators; it is to a discussion of scholarship on comics style that I now turn.

Comics Style

Style, as Charles Hatfield puts it, "has proven a hard nut for analysis; many comics scholars have despaired of getting a handle on it."[270] For Robert C. Harvey, the artist's style, "the mark of the maker . . . is marginal and subtle, too subtle for much elaboration,"[271] and "evaluation based on style becomes largely a matter of personal taste."[272] As Hatfield describes, until the publication of McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, "fans lacked even the rudiments of a toolbox

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[266] Ibid.
[267] McCloud, *Understanding*, 65.
[268] Ibid., 67.
[269] Ibid., 68.
[270] Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 37.
[271] Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 10.
[272] Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 17.

that would help them speak analytically about differences among comic art styles."[273]

In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud introduces the "Big Triangle" of style (**Fig. 2-1**).[274] As Hatfield writes, McCloud's Triangle offers comics scholars "a way of grounding the usual impressionistic judgments about differences in style, for example 'cartoony' versus 'realistic'."[275] The base of McCloud's

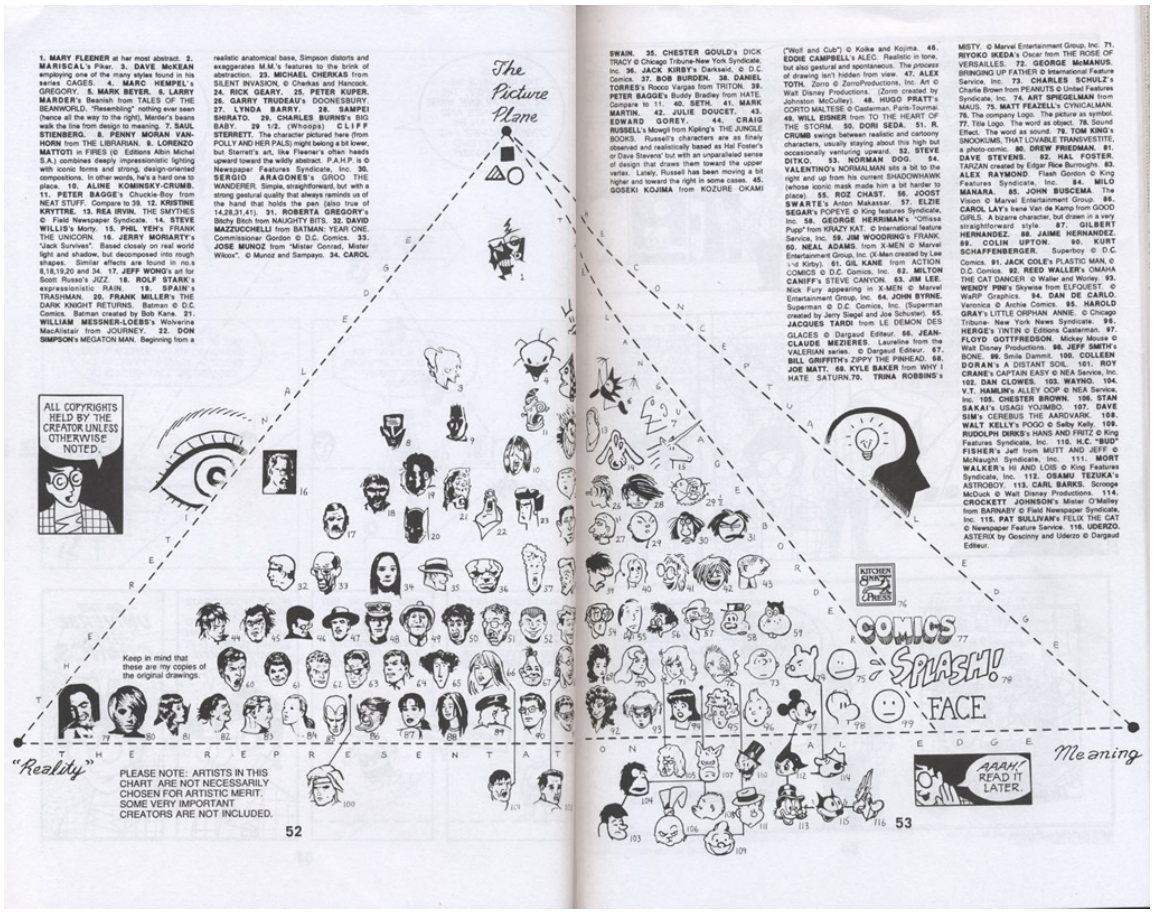

Fig. 2-1 – The Triangle of Style. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics,* 52-53.

Triangle – its x-axis – describes a shift from photorealism to cartooniness, or symbolic abstraction: moving from left to right, McCloud's sample images become less and less "realistic" and more and more simplified, schematic,

[273] Hatfield, *Hand*, 37.
[274] See McCloud, *Understanding*, 52-53.
[275] Hatfield, *Hand*, 39.

"cartoony." The Triangle's height – its y- axis – describes the movement toward what McCloud calls "the picture plane," or as Hatfield explains, "toward absolute pictorial abstraction, or appreciation of the formal aspects of the picture as such . . . the realm of pure *mark-making*."[276]

In his essay "Comics Modes," Josef Witek discusses the range of visual styles available to comics creators, noting that "[c]ontemporary comics are rooted stylistically in the confluence of two distinct traditions of visual representation"[277] –the two extreme poles of McCloud's Triangle's x-axis, styles often described respectively as "realism" or "naturalism," and "cartooniness." As Witek describes, the "cartoony" style "grows out of caricature, with its basic principles of simplification and exaggeration"[278] while the so-called "realistic" or "naturalistic" style "derives from the conventions of realism in the visual arts and particularly in photography".[279] Each of these visual styles, as Witek notes, has also "come to carry with it a characteristic set of narrative tendencies and an orientation toward its themes and subject matter" that Witek calls the style's "narrative ethos."[280] As Witek notes, cartoony styles are "most closely associated with verbal humor and slapstick comedy in comic strips and in gag cartoons (what is sometimes called 'big-foot cartooning')" while the naturalistic style "has long been the preferred approach for stories of adventure and domestic romance" in comic books and strips.[281] Taken together, visual style and narrative ethos make up what Witek calls a comic's "mode," and Witek refers to these modes as "the cartoon mode" and "the naturalistic mode," emphasizing that the two categories are by no means mutually exclusive, and that any descriptions of the characteristics of these modes indicate general tendencies rather than hard-and-fast rules.[282]

In Neil Cohn's book *The Visual Language of Comics*, he defines and gives names for a range of variations of what he calls "American Visual Language" in

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[276] Ibid., 41.
[277] Josef Witek, "Comics Modes," in *Critical Approaches to Comics*, eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 28.
[278] Ibid., 28.
[279] Ibid., 32.
[280] Ibid., 28.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Ibid.

comics. The main two Cohn names are "Barksian"[283] (after Carl Barks, famous for his *Scrooge McDuck* comics for Disney) and "Kirbyan"[284] (after the hugely influential superhero comics artist Jack Kirby). Barksian and Kirbyan "dialects" of American Visual Language in comics equate roughly with Witek's "cartoon" and "naturalistic" modes; along with McCloud's Triangle of Style, Cohn and Witek work on comics modes and visual languages has helped greatly in this study's discussion of the way gay and queer male cartoonists have made use of comics styles for a variety of different effects. I now turn to a discussion of Charles Hatfield's work on the tensions of comics reading, and the ways in which cartoonists play on these tensions in order to create meaning in comics narratives.

The Tensions of Comics Reading

In this section, I will discuss Charles Hatfield's work on the tensions of comics reading, which is to an extent influenced by McCloud's exploration of the varied "ways in which words and pictures can *combine* in comics."[285] McCloud's definition of the medium – "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" – does not explicitly refer to the combination of word and image in comics. Nevertheless, McCloud acknowledges the tremendous importance of verbal-visual blending to the growth of the medium, and explores the varied "ways in which words and pictures can *combine* in comics,"[286] arguing that "in comics at its *best*, words and pictures are like *partners* in a *dance* and each one takes turns *leading*."[287]

The ways in which words and images combine in comics is also of interest to the comics scholar Charles Hatfield. In the second chapter of *Alternative Comics*, Hatfield explores the four key tensions which he sees as fundamental to the medium and hence to the experience of comics reading: (1)

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[283] Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 141-143.
[284] Ibid., 139-141.
[285] Ibid., 152.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid., 156.

code vs. code or "word" vs. "image"; (2) single image vs. image-in-series; (3) sequence vs. surface; and (4) text as experience vs. text as object.[288] I will now discuss Hatfield's approach to analysing comics in more detail.

Hatfield argues that "[c]omics, like other hybrid texts, collapse the word/image dichotomy," with written text functioning like images, and images like written text.[289] Pictures, like words, "are not simply to be received" but "must be decoded"; however, responding to comics often depends on understanding word and image as two *different* types of code, and hence sees the tension between the signifying codes "word" and "image" to be fundamental to the comics medium.[290] As Hatfield explains, the different implications of "word" codes and "image" codes "can be played against each other" in order to gloss, to illustrate, or indeed to contradict, ironize, or complicate the other.[291]

The tension between different codes of signification ("word" vs. "image") regularly interacts with a second tension, the tension between the single image and the image-in-series. The cartoonist's task is "to evoke an imagined sequence by creating a visual series" of panels, a process Hatfield calls *breakdown*, borrowing from Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Funnies*.[292] The reader's role, then, is to translate this given series of single images into a narrative sequence by achieving what McCloud has termed "closure," a process that, as Hatfield shows, can seem spontaneous and unproblematic, or instead require a great deal of active effort on the reader's part. To some extent, the process of closure between panels depends not only on the interaction between images in a series, but also on the interplay between the verbal and the visual: "[V]erbal continuity can impose structure on even the most radically disjointed series"[293] of panels, and the two tensions discussed so far can "interact to create a yet more complex tension, soliciting the reader's active efforts at resolution"[294] – the tension between sequence and surface.

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[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid., 37.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid. See also Harvey, *Art of the Funnies*, 14-15.
[293] Ibid., 44.
[294] Ibid., 48.

As Hatfield describes, the single comics panel functions simultaneously as "a 'moment' in an imagined sequence of events" and as "a graphic element in an atemporal design" laid out "on a larger surface or surfaces (that is, a page or pages)."[295] At "the heart of comics design" lies a tension "between the concept of 'breaking down' a story into constituent images and the concept of laying out those images together on an unbroken surface."[296] Hence, readers can choose between seeing the single panel as a moment in the narrative, "and seeing it in more holistic fashion, as a design element that contributes to the overall balance (or in some cases the meaningful *imbalance*) of the layout."[297]

This tension between sequence and surface is, more generally, just one example of a larger tension, between text as a reading experience over time, and text as a material object.[298] As Hatfield asserts, the materiality of comics includes not just the design or layout of the comics page "but also the physical makeup of the text, including its size, shape, binding, paper, and printing";[299] such material, technological and economic considerations also exert an influence on drawing style and technique. By calling attention to the relationship between the comics text as both a narrative and a material object in a variety of ways, alternative cartoonists in particular highlight the distance between reader and text, "and foreground the reader's creative intervention in meaning-making."[300]

Hatfield's work, in conversation with Scott McCloud and other comics scholars, points toward new ways of analysing comics as aesthetic productions, importantly in terms of their style and their visual/verbal hybridity; Hatfield's and McCloud's insights will be important to this thesis in its analysis of alternative queer comics not simply as narratives, but specifically as *comics* narratives.

In the following chapter, I turn to the history of LGBT comics before going on to map the conventions of the dominant genres – gay porno and gay

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[295] Ibid., 48.
[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid., 52.
[298] Ibid., 58.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid., 63.

ghetto – in Chapter Four. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I discuss in more detail the ways in which alternative queer male comics adapted and challenged the conventions of the dominant genres.

Chapter Three: The History of LGBT Comics

This chapter explores the history of the LGBT comics field. I aim to present a history of the field that brings together what very little research has been done by others; there has been little scholarly research on the history of gay comics, and the few articles on the subject that exist have been mainly the work of fan-historians and gay comics artists themselves. I aim to add to this knowledge with material drawn from interviews I have undertaken with the key figures in early gay comics history, particularly the first two editors of the anthology Gay Comix, namely Howard Cruse and Robert Triptow. It is also my aim to organize the history of the field by establishing a number of "waves" of activity. I posit that the history of LGBT comics can be considered in terms of a "pre-Stonewall" period stretching from the late 1890s into the 1960s, followed by three successive "waves" of activity more or less tied to the subsequent decades. I will demonstrate the ways in which each of these waves of LGBT cartooning emerged within specific cultural, historical, political and theoretical contexts, and demonstrate the ways in which these contexts shaped the kinds of LGBT identities constructed within these comics. This is necessary in order to understand how important events such as Stonewall and the AIDS crisis, and political movements such as Gay Liberation, Lesbian feminism, and the queer activism, have all had an impact on the kinds of stories being told in comics. I will discuss, in particular, the way in which gay male identity was discursively constructed in gay male comics and cartoons from the pre-Stonewall period onwards; as we will see, the queer male alternative comics that emerged from the 1990s onwards responded to these earlier constructions of gay identity, questioning and adapting them, and creating new kinds of representations.

With regard to the male cartoonists of the pre-Stonewall and First Waves, particularly, I argue that the kinds of images of the gay male body and culture constitute what Stuart Hall has called a "regime of representation." This term refers to "the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through

which 'difference' is represented at any one historical moment."[301] As Sean Nixon describes, a regime of representation is a representational system "governed by a certain discursive regularity"[302] that constructs a particular kind of knowledge or "truth" about the group represented. The "truths" discursively produced about same-sex desire in the discourses of these early gay comics contrast with the "truths" produced about gay men in American medical and juridical discourses of the time. While mainstream American cultural representations of gay men tended to represent them as pathetic figures – angst-ridden, mentally ill, effeminate or criminal – pre-Stonewall cartoonists and illustrators, on the whole, presented physically and mentally healthy, happy, and traditionally masculine images of homosexuality.

These kinds of images were subversive with regards to the mainstream, heteronormative American culture of the 1950s and 1960s, but within the field of gay male comics – and gay male culture – quickly became normative, reified and naturalized, and proliferated in the gay male pornographic comics and cartoons, and what I call the gay ghetto comics and cartoons, produced after Stonewall and disseminated in the emerging gay press in the 1960s and 1970s, and in underground comix of the late 1970s.

Gay pornographic comics and gay ghetto comics became the two dominant generic paradigms within the field of gay male comics. Contemporary gay cartoonists continue to respond to their generic conventions. Some follow these conventions fairly faithfully, while others subvert them in subtle or radical ways, but the two generic paradigms are rarely dispensed with completely. I will also discuss how the emergence of "queer" activism and theory in the late 1980s and 1990s impacted the comics of the Second and Third Waves, influencing the ways in which they responded to the generic paradigms of gay ghetto and gay porno comics.

The LGBT comics I discuss are important efforts to document queer lives and cultures that can be understood as constituting what Ann Cvetkovich has

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[301] Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in his, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 232.
[302] Sean Nixon, *Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship, and Contemporary Consumption* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), 12.

called "an archive of feelings."[303] These comics are repositories for queer emotions, interrelationships, and sexual fantasies, and for feelings of pleasure, joy, and connectedness but also of alienation, trauma and distress. These are affects that Cvetkovich argues serve as "the foundation for the formation of public cultures"[304] – including the subcultural print cultures around LGBT comics.

Before the 1960s: Illegal Homoerotic Graphics and Legal "Physique Art"

The roots of gay comics can be traced at least as far back as the early twentieth century, to the pornographic sequential narratives Thomas Waugh calls "underground gay graphics."[305] Hundreds of such "illicit erotic graphic works, ranging from crude pencil drawings to paintings and prints of considerable sophistication, circulated clandestinely throughout North America and Europe during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century,"[306] most commonly as small photographic prints. Among the best known of the early homoerotic artists is "Blade" (Neel Bate), who in the 1940s wrote and drew *The Barn*, portraying an erotic encounter between a motorcyclist and a farm boy. As cartoonist Jerry Mills describes, "*The Barn* can arguably be considered a precursor to gay comics" in its "combining [of] text and superb sequential illustrations."[307]

These erotic sequential narratives were created primarily as a turn-on, rather than a political statement. They tell stories about sexual encounters between men – often "straight" types such as motorcyclists, soldiers and marines. They are not in any straightforward sense about the assumption of a politicized "gay" identity, a concept that only became imaginable in the late 1960s with the rise of the Gay Liberation movement. But while they may not be political, these narratives are nevertheless transgressive, as Jean-Paul

[303] Cvetkovich, *Archive*.
[304] Ibid., 10.
[305] Waugh, *Out/Lines,* 11.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Mills, "Introduction," 9.

Jennequin points out, "simply because they exist"[308] in a socio-historical context in which same-sex representation was banned in cinema by the Hays Code, prohibited in comic books by the Comics Code in 1954, and virtually non-existent in mainstream daily newspaper comic strips.

Moreover, as George Chauncey has demonstrated, a vital and visible homosexual subculture did exist in New York between 1890 and 1940, with homosexual men socializing at saloon bars, drag balls, and private house parties.[309] Though Chauncey makes no specific mention of homoerotic graphic narratives, it is by no means inconceivable that such prints did circulate in the very subculture he describes; they may well have been understood by some men as an affirmation of sexual desire and collective identity.

Indeed, Jennequin notes that there is a certain regularity to these early illustrated narratives: "certain rules are established – the rules of the homosexual subculture of the era, such as a preference for young or very young males."[310] A certain double standard is put into place: "What is against the rules, rebellious or subversive in the context of society as a whole, is in contrast with the conventional standards of a micro-society that has generated its own customs."[311] Furthermore, it is possible to see the force of these "unwritten rules" in American gay culture by noting their pervasive presence not only in these illicit images, but also in the legal homoerotic images available in the physique magazines of the 1950s.[312]

The first physique magazines appeared in the US at the end of the 1940s, "claim[ing] to be produced for the benefit of 'artists' and 'physical culture enthusiasts',"[313] while in fact their photographs of discreetly posed bodybuilders attracted a growing homosexual male audience. Bob Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* began publication in 1951 and included "physique art" – drawn and painted illustrations – alongside the usual photographs, by artists

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[308] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 36.
[309] See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940* (London: Flamingo, 1995).
[310] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 36.
[311] Ibid.
[312] Ibid.
[313] Cooper, *Sexual Perspective,* 235.

such as Etienne (Dom Orejudos), Spartacus and Art-Bob. Some of these artists also created more explicit works for clandestine circulation.[314] In 1957, *Physique Pictorial* published the work of the Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen under the pen-name "Tom of Finland."[315] Tom was to become arguably "the best-known and most widely appreciated producer of gay erotica of the second half of the twentieth century,"[316] and extremely influential on gay pornographic illustration and comics.

The kinds of homoerotic images found in the illegal pornographic prints and in the legal physique publications constitute a "regime of representation" found in different contexts and across different representational forms – in both legal and illegal publications, in photographic images, drawn images, comics sequences, and written words. The "truths" produced about same-sex desire in the discourses of physique magazines and the illicit homoerotic prints of the 1950s contrast with the "truths" produced about gay men in the medical, legal, and popular discourses of the time. As Jeffrey Escoffier writes,

> Immediately after World War II, homosexuality emerged in Americans' public consciousness with surprising vigor. The controversy in 1948, after Alfred Kinsey reported widespread incidence of homosexual experience, firmly establishing homosexuality as a public issue. In the early 1950s, Senator McCarthy reinforced this with his highly publicized witch-hunt to fire homosexuals, as well as communists, from government employment.[317]

The hegemonic discourse of 1950s America remained that of psychiatry, which "took on an ever more moralistic tone and tended

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[314] Waugh, *Out/Lines*, 80-82.
[315] Micha Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity and Homosexuality* (New York: St Martins Press, 2000), 4.
[316] Ibid., x.
[317] Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998), 83. See also John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), esp. 40-56.

increasingly to reflect conventional social values."[318] In 1952, the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*), published by the American Psychiatric Association, listed homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance."[319] A large-scale 1962 psychiatric study, *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals*, was used to justify the inclusion of homosexuality as a disorder, a view that was influential on the medical profession as a whole.[320] In gay pulp novels of the 1950s and 1960s, homosexuality was portrayed as tragic, and homosexuals as – in Richard Dyer's words – "sad young men,"[321] soft, languid, melancholy and effeminate. Similarly, Hollywood films portrayed homosexual men as effeminate, sick, and/or criminal.[322]

In contrast, the discourses of the homoerotic prints and physique magazines produce a different truth about male same-sex desire, portraying men who are physically powerful, strong and masculine, whose sexual desires and activities are not sick or shameful. The "truths" discursively produced within gay media were not, of course, given the same weight or authority as the knowledges produced by psychiatric and legal institutions. As Foucault points out, procedures of exclusion such as "the forbidden speech" and taboos about sexuality constrain the circulation of certain discourses,[323] and in the 1950s, magazines such as *Physique Pictorial* tended to disavow their own homoeroticism, feigning a respectable air through allusions to Classicism.

However, as Alexandra Chasin argues, the physique magazines provided evidence for a geographically dispersed homosexual male readership that they were not alone, and can be seen as precursors of the homophile publications that emerged in the 1950s.[324] The cartoons and illustrations in these publications would develop into more fully-realized narrative sequences in the

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[318] Ibid., 84.
[319] Nicholas Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 247.
[320] Ibid.
[321] Dyer, "Seen to be believed," 40-42.
[322] See Benshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images*, esp. 85-106.
[323] Michael Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 48-78.
[324] Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Lesbian and Gay Movement Goes to Market* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 89.

following decades. They were to play an important role in the discursive project of the emerging gay press: the construction of a shared gay identity.

Gay Cartoons and Comics in the 1960s

I will now discuss the gay male comics and cartoons of the 1960s, which I argue extend and reproduce the regime of representation established by the homoerotic artists and illustrators of the 1950s. The cartoons and comics of the 1960s – which were published in gay newspapers and magazines, rather than comic books – played an important role in the discursive construction of a sense of shared gay identity and culture. Moreover, they tended to represent a particular kind of gay male body as valuable, desirable, and normative. The gay comics of the 1960s also establish humour and eroticism as important features of the field, and thus are influential on the emergence of the "gay ghetto" and "gay porno" genres of the First Wave, which the alternative queer comics of the 1990s then react to, creating a more diverse representation of gay identity and culture.

It is unsurprising that the gay male comics of the 1960s share certain key features with the earlier homoerotic illustrations and narratives of the 1950s, since many of the artists are the same. The gay male comics that emerged in the 1960s were almost exclusively published in the emerging lesbian and gay press rather than in comic books. The comics produced by the dominant mainstream comic book publishers in the US at that time – Marvel and DC – were aimed and marketed predominantly toward children and teenagers, and as discussed in Chapter One, the Comics Code Authority forbade the depiction of "sexual deviance." In the mid-1960s, the first "underground" comic books (or "comix") that dealt with adult themes emerged, but it was not until the 1970s that underground comix on gay themes would appear. Therefore, gay newspapers and magazines were the exclusive venues for the publication of openly gay-themed comics during the 1960s.

In her study of the commercialization of gay culture, Alexandra Chasin points to the importance of newspapers and magazines in fostering a sense of community. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's work on "imagined communities,"

Chasin suggests that "the rise of a commercial gay press gave gay men and lesbians confidence in the idea that they shared a time, place, and language with other gay men and lesbians in the United States."[325] Rodger Streitmatter points to the importance of three nationally-distributed monthly publications in channelling a consciousness of homosexual collectivity into the notion of gay community during the 1950s: "*ONE*, *Mattachine Review* and *The Ladder* . . . began to build a national gay and lesbian community."[326] Allied with homophile organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, these three magazines tended to take a cautious, conservative approach to social change.[327] In line with their self-consciously serious self-presentation, these publications for the most part eschewed bold visual elements, and therefore did not include ongoing cartoons or comic strips.

However, in the 1960s, a new breed of activists rejected the cautious approach of the 1950s in favour of "the public and confrontational tactics"[328] popularized by women's liberation and black liberation groups. New publications like *The Homosexual Citizen* (1966) and *Drum* (1964) "eclipsed the moribund *ONE* and *Mattachine Review.*"[329] *Drum* became the first gay publication that daringly combined homoerotica with news content and political commentary.[330] It also featured the first ongoing gay comic strip, *Harry Chess: That Man From A.U.N.T.I.E*, written and drawn by Al Shapiro using the pen-name "A. Jay."[331] *Harry Chess* spoofed the contemporary secret agent craze (see **Fig. 3-1**), and its popularity meant "it wasn't long before a token comic strip became the norm in gay magazines."[332] In 1966, the *Harry Chess* strips were collected in book form.[333] Whilst erotic, the strip did not show full nudity until moving to *Queen's Quarterly* after *Drum* folded in 1967.[334]

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[325] Chasin, *Selling Out*, 91.
[326] Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 50.
[327] See Ibid., Chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of these magazines.
[328] Ibid., 51.
[329] Ibid., 53.
[330] Ibid., 61.
[331] Mills, "Introduction," 9.
[332] Howard Stangroom, "The Comic Book Closet," *Comics Forum* no. 23, Summer 2003, 45.
[333] Ibid. See A. Jay, *The Uncensored Adventures of Harry Chess* (Philadelphia: Trojan Books, 1966). Some strips were reprinted in early volumes of Winston Leyland's anthology *Meatmen*.
[334] Mills, "Introduction," 10.

Fig. 3-1 – A. Jay (Al Shapiro), *Harry Chess: That Man From A.U.N.T.I.E.* From Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 7.

The cartoons and comics that began to appear in the gay press from the 1960s onward played an important part in the discursive construction and consolidation of a sense of shared gay identity and culture. Tall, dark, handsome and hirsute, Chess's adventures were "crafted both to amuse readers and to affirm gay values," argues Streitmatter: seeing Chess having sexy adventures "validated the readers' sexual desires." Also, "[b]y depicting gay life in the fast lane," the comic strip reinforced another of *Drum*'s major themes: the argument that, in contrast with the rather sniffy attitude of the homophile organizations toward the gay bar scene, the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement of the 1960s ought to embrace the gay social scene.[335] Streitmatter also emphasizes that just as celebrating sexualized male images in the gay press was a politically

[335] Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 98-99.

important act, so too "speaking in the gay lexicon"[336] or argot used within the gay subculture affirmed a sense of shared gay community and identity; the comic strips in the gay press were no exception, and *Harry Chess,* for example, "overflowed with [such] words and phrases . . . most of them carrying sexual messages."[337]

Around 1967, Joe Johnson's *Miss Thing* (**Fig. 3-2**) became the first ongoing, one-panel cartoon feature in *The Los Angeles Advocate*. The latter was America's "first true gay newspaper" - it contained nonfiction material in a tabloid format, had a full-time paid staff, and was the first openly gay newspaper to actively

Fig. 3-2 – Joe Johnson, *Miss Thing.* From Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 10.

[336] Ibid., 103.
[337] Ibid., 104.

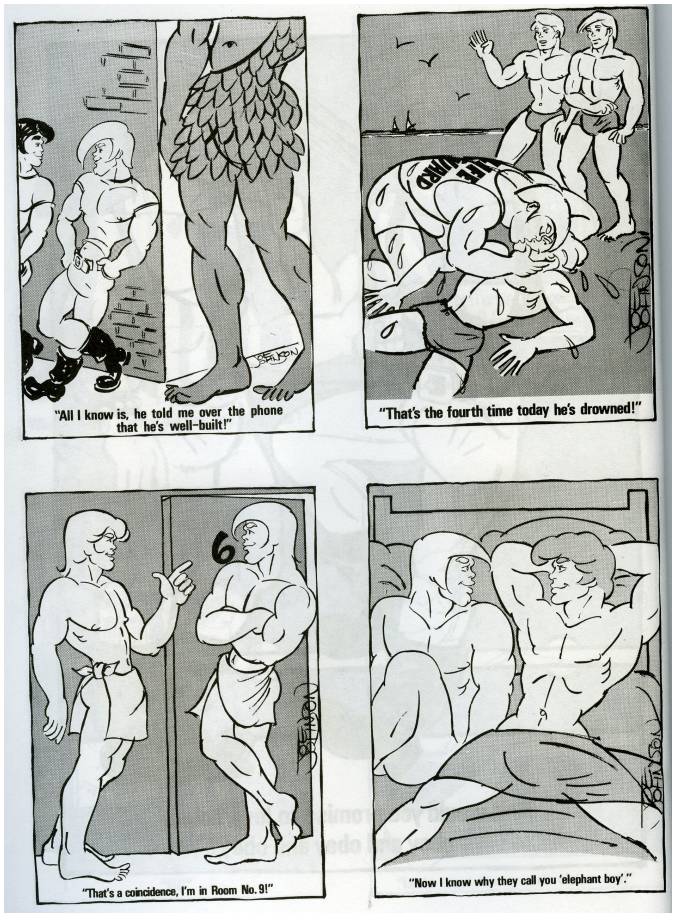

Fig. 3-3 – Joe Johnson, *Big Dick.* From *Meatmen* vol. 1, 36.

court national advertisers.[338] The pompadoured Miss Thing was an outrageous "queen," an example of one of the predominant gay types identified by Richard Dyer.[339] The feature's brand of campy humour quickly came to be seen as out of date and inimical to the cause of gay rights, and the strip was discontinued not long after the Stonewall Riots.[340] Gay men's increasing adoption of masculine styles was also documented by Joe Johnson in his other cartoon feature, *Big Dick* (**fig. 3**).[341] This featured the "sexploits" of the eponymous, blonde, horny "macho man" – another of the gay types identified by Dyer.[342]

During the 1960s, a number of United States Supreme Court rulings liberalized pornography laws, allowing for the commercialization of

[338] Ibid., 87.
[339] See Dyer, "Seen to be believed," 30-37.
[340] Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 12.
[341] Ibid.
[342] Dyer, "Seen to be believed," 37-40.

pornography.[343] The 1970s saw the proliferation of openly gay, homoerotic magazines with full-frontal nudity and sex, such as *Mandate*, *In Touch*, *Honcho*, and *Drummer*. Some of these also featured cartoons and comics. *In Touch* published Klamik's ("Sean"'s) erotic work and, later, *Poppers* by Jerry Mills. *Drummer* became the new home to Shapiro's *Harry Chess* and British artist Bill Ward's strip *Drum*. At roughly the same time, comic books featuring the erotic work of a single author begin to be published, including Etienne's *Adventuretime*, and Tom of Finland's hardcore *Kake* comic books, which were published in Denmark and Sweden in 1967.[344]

The cartoons and comic strips appearing in the gay press of the 1960s and into the 1970s are discursive productions which shaped their producers' and consumers' understanding of gay identity. They are also part of a broader regime of representation, sharing certain key features also shared by the earlier homoerotic illustrations and narratives of the 1950s, as Jean-Paul Jennequin describes.[345] Sexuality and humour are both central to these comics and cartoons. Sexuality is never out of sight, whether because the comics are explicitly pornographic (Tom, Etienne, Sean) or simply suggestive (*Harry Chess*, *Miss Thing*, *Big Dick*). Humour, too, is pervasive, taking "the very specific form of camp," a form of humour very popular in the gay subculture; this is not only true of strips like *Harry Chess* and *Miss Thing*, but also of the pornographic work of Tom of Finland and Etienne.[346] Moreover, despite the different graphic styles of specific artists, their gay heroes share certain physical features: "They are all young, muscular or athletic – broad shoulders, narrow hips, square jaws – and well hung,"[347] continuing the kinds of representations found in the "physique magazines" of the 1950s, unsurprisingly, as the illustrators are often the same.

It must be noted that these images, produced by and aimed at gay men, definitely do not use the languid, effeminate image of the "sad young man"[348] popular in representations of gay men in Hollywood cinema and on the covers

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[343] Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures*, 5.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA", 38.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid.
[348] See Dyer, "Seen to be believed," 40-42.

of pulp novels dealing with the "problem" of homosexuality in the 1950s. Faced with this stereotype in dominant discourses of gay identity in American popular culture, as well as discourses of homosexuality as mental illness which persisted in the field of psychiatry, gay cartoonists presented an idealised image of the gay man as robust, mentally and physically healthy and strong, and usually traditionally "masculine." Moreover, there is no angst-ridden introspection in these comics, in contrast with representations of gay men in the cinema and pulp fiction: "The heroes are not ashamed of who they are or what they do"[349] – rather, they are joyful and *happy*, and as Jennequin describes,

> The broad smiles of Tom of Finland's characters struck more than one reader of the time growing up in contempt and self-hatred, and provided for many isolated gay men a form of gay pride far more concrete than the gay pride events in distant cities.[350]

Micha Ramakers similarly argues that the work of Tom of Finland – and, I would add, other gay cartoonists – not only "provided immeasurable pleasure to several generations of gay men" but also "offered what had seemed unattainable to many of them: tools for an affirmative identity."[351]

The regime of representation established by the homoerotic artists and illustrators of the 1950s, then, was extended and reproduced in the comics and cartoons appearing in the gay press of the 1960s. Strips such as A. Jay's *Harry Chess*, Joe Johnson's *Big Dick*, and the straightforwardly erotic work of Tom, Sean and Etienne construct a normative representation of the (ideal) gay male body as physically healthy, athletic and masculine, and while this kind of representation is subversive with regards to mainstream American culture, it quickly becomes a stereotypical convention in the field of gay male comics and cartoons. As a consequence, then, these comics tend to marginalize and devalue those bodies that fail to conform to this ideal: Older men, non-whites, men who

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[349] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 38.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ramakers, *Dirty*, x.

are too fat or too thin, and (with the notable exception of the short-lived *Miss Thing*) effeminate homosexuals are largely absent; where they do appear they are figures of fun rather than objects of desire, and certainly do not play a central role in these comics.

The pre-Stonewall comics and cartoons are influential on the emergence of the "gay ghetto" and "gay porno" genres of the First Wave, which further consolidate and extend this portrayal of the gay male body, and which the alternative queer comics of the 1990s then react to, creating a more diverse representation of gay identity and culture.

The First Wave: Lesbian and Gay Representations in Underground Comix

This section deals with what I have called the First Wave proper of lesbian and gay comics production; many of these First Wave comics appeared as part of the emerging underground comic book ("comix") scene, rather than in gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines. In this section, I will discuss how this First Wave emerged against a socio-political background in America that was heavily informed by the Gay Liberation and Lesbian Feminist movements. In many ways these comics can be seen as liberationist propaganda intended to empower and "recruit" the reader for the lesbian and gay movement, although, as I note, they do not do so in a completely unquestioning way. The First Wave lesbian and gay-themed comics are also important as they already contain many of the themes that would become conventionalized in the gay ghetto comics, one of the dominant genres within the field of gay male comics.

During the 1960s, the cartoons and strips appearing in gay publications sometimes gently mocked, but nonetheless archived and affirmed, gay subcultural life and desire. The Stonewall riots of 1969 are often taken as the starting point of Gay Liberation and hence of the formation of the "lesbian and gay community." However, these earlier comics appearing in gay magazines and newspapers already celebrated and helped to discursively shape their readers' identification with the emerging sense of gay identity and community. In addition to the cartoons and strips appearing in the lesbian and gay press, gay and lesbian representations and narratives began to appear in the underground

comic books in the 1970s. These representations were much more overtly informed by the theoretical underpinnings of the gay liberation, as well as lesbian feminist movements.

Underground comic books – often referred to as "comix" – emerged in America in the mid-1960s, and concentrated specifically on adult themes, notably sex, drugs and radical politics. Hatfield argues that the undergrounds thus transformed the American book – "an object that was jejune and mechanical in origin" – into "a radically new kind of expressive object, a vehicle for the most personal and unguarded of revelations" capable of conveying "an unprecedented sense of intimacy."[352] The kind of confessional autobiography that emerged from the undergrounds would become central to the alternative comics of the 1980s and 1990s – including the queer comics.

The first widely-available underground comic was Robert Crumb's *Zap Comix* no. 1, which appeared in 1967 and inspired many other cartoonists to start doing their own commix. Creators other than Crumb who made a significant impact included Gilbert Shelton, S. Clay Wilson and Manuel "Spain" Rodriguez. By the early 1970s, underground publishers like Last Gasp, Kitchen Sink and Rip Off "were putting out entire lines of comix, while at the grass-roots level, self-publishing was more widespread than ever."[353] This "publishing revolution" was fuelled by "the new accessibility of offset litho printing"[354] due to smaller sized machinery which enabled "speedier, more flexible publication, less vulnerable to the censorship of compositors – in other words, a more devolved unit, which had obvious political implications."[355] Underground comix were sold via a retail network of alternative record shops, bookshops and hippie "headshops."[356]

Underground comix, according to Paul Lopes, formed the basis of a field of restricted production within the broad field of American comics production:

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[352] Hatfield, *Alternative,* 7.

[353] Sabin, *Adult Comics*, 41.
[354] Ibid., 37.
[355] Ibid., 264, n. 3.
[356] Ibid., 45.

> They were the first to claim principles of autonomy that rejected the conventions of the field and the pure commercial ethos that remained its raison d'etre. They also established the possibility of criteria of judgment that viewed comic books as a serious art form open to expressions comparable to any other art form. And they were the first to suggest that comic books could be the vehicle for an unmediated authentic expression of their artists.[357]

However, while the early underground cartoonists – most of whom were heterosexual men – gleefully broke taboos relating to drugs and sexual violence, they did not seem particularly comfortable with challenging traditional notions of sexuality or gender. As Trina Robbins describes, many female cartoonists found they "were not especially welcome in this alternative version of the old boys' club, and were not invited into the comix being produced."[358] Robbins reacted to this by producing the first all-female comix anthology in 1970, entitled *It Ain't Me, Babe*, and followed by a semi-regular anthology, *Wimmen's Comix*, in 1972.

Robert Triptow describes the portrayal of homosexuality in the work of two leading underground cartoonists:

> Spain Rodriguez told of an effeminate man willingly giving head to a crowd of straight dudes, who then beat him up. ("I can't wait to do it again next week!" exclaims the victim.) Robert Crumb's sole glance at the subculture was to complain in print about how trendy gay people irritated him.[359]

Just as these early feminist comix reacted to the sexism of the male-dominated undergrounds, the first lesbian titles were directly reacting to what

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[357] Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: the Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 75.
[358] Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz,* 85.
[359] Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 15.

they saw as the heterocentric bias of the feminist comix. Trina Robbins, a heterosexual woman, had contributed a story titled "Sandy Comes Out" to *Wimmen's Comix* no. 1.[360] Reacting to what she saw as an inauthentic and – albeit unintentionally – mocking representation of lesbian desire. Mary Wings produced the first lesbian-themed comic book by a lesbian, *Come Out Comix* (**Fig. 3-4**), in 1973, which she followed up with *Dyke Shorts* in 1978 (Wings

Fig. 3-4 -Mary Wings, *Come Out Comix*, np.

[360] Trina Robbins, "Sandy Comes Out", *Wimmen's Comix* no. 1 (San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp, 1972), np. Reprinted in Hall, *No Straight Lines*, 5-7.

would later go on to write the first lesbian detective novel, *She Came Too Late*, in 1985).[361] Like Wings, Roberta Gregory reacted to the heterocentrism of the *Wimmen's Comix* by drawing a lesbian romance story titled "A Modern Romance," which appeared in *Wimmen's Comix* no. 4,[362] and later published a solo comic, *Dynamite Damsels*.[363]

Wings' *Come Out Comix*, and Gregory's "A Modern Romance" and *Dynamite Damsels*, are very much products of gay and lesbian liberation. While the comic strips and cartoons appearing in gay magazines, newspapers and newsletters can be seen as archives of gay subcultural style, ritual and slang, Wings' and Gregory's comics are more overtly informed by the theoretical underpinnings of the gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements. As Steven Seidman describes, liberation theory "presupposed a notion of an innate polymorphous, androgynous human nature" and aimed at freeing individuals from the constraints of a repressive sex/gender system "that locked them into mutually exclusive homo/hetero and feminine/masculine roles."[364] Gay liberationists believed that traditional gender roles constrained people from recognising, in essentialist terms, their true sexual selves. Homosexuality was represented as a natural, innate identity repressed by heterosexist power structures. Whereas the homophile organizations of the 1950s and early 60s had sought gradual assimilation into heterosexual society for homosexuals, gay liberationists insisted on the importance of publicly assuming a gay identity, and of challenging and discrediting professional opinion. To this end, gay liberationists formed consciousness-raising groups where lesbians and gay men could share experiences of homophobia, and encouraged gay people to "come out."[365]

"Coming out" is a central theme in the early lesbian comix, which can themselves be seen as a form of consciousness-raising. Gay liberationists

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[361] Mary Wings, *Come Out Comix* (Portland, OR: Self-published, 1973); Mary Wings, *Dyke Shorts* (Portland, OR: Self-published, 1978); Mary Wings, *She Came Too Late* (London: Women's Press, 1986).
[362] Roberta Gregory, "A Modern Romance", *Wimmen's Comix* no. 4 (San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp, 1972), np.
[363] Roberta Gregory, *Dynamite Damsels* (Long Beach, CA: Self-published, 1976).
[364] Seidman, "Identity Politics," 117.
[365] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 38.

Fig. 3-5 – Rand Holmes, "The Continuing Adventures of Harold Hedd." *All-Canadian Beaver Comix* no. 1, np.

"promoted the coming-out narrative – an unambiguous and public declaration of one's homosexuality – as a potent means of social transformation."[366] Wings' and Gregory's comix all contain coming-out stories, bearing witness to the influence and importance of gay liberationist and lesbian feminist politics in the early 1970s. They can be seen as liberationist propaganda intended to embolden, empower and "recruit" the reader for the lesbian and gay movement.

The two most prominent representations of gay male characters in 1970s underground comix are also coming out stories of sorts. Both are also depictions of gay hippies, contrasting with the conventionally idealized, clean-cut, athletic and traditionally masculine images of gay men circulating at the time in comics within the gay press. First, in 1971, Canadian underground cartoonist Rand Holmes published a short story in which his hippie hero, Harold Hedd, is shown in bed with another man (**Fig. 3-5**).[367] The story explicitly critiques Dr David Reuben's infamous assertion in *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex* that gay men's "primary interest is the penis, not the person."[368] Therefore, this comic is another example of the gay liberationist emphasis on discrediting the "expert" opinions of psychiatric, medical and legal authorities, and insistence instead on gay peoples' personal experiences as authoritative, as well as on liberated erotic expression.

Second, Howard Cruse had been publishing his cartoons and strips in underground newspapers since the early 1970s, most notably the ongoing strip *Barefootz*, collected by Kitchen Sink Press as *Barefootz Funnies* no. 1 in 1975. The second issue, published in 1976, featured a story titled "Gravy on Gay", one of the earliest sympathetic representations of a gay male in underground comix, in which title character Barefootz's close friend, the hippie artist Headrack, came out as gay.[369] Cruse had not publicly announced his sexuality at the time and he says in many ways "Gravy on Gay" was him "testing the waters to see if it

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[366] Ibid.
[367] Rand Holmes, "The Continuing Adventures of Harold Hedd", *Georgia Straight* (underground newspaper), 19-22 October 1971, np. Reprinted in *All-Canadian Beaver Comix* no. 1 (Canada: The Georgia Straight, 1973), np.
[368] David R. Reuben, *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex – But Were Afraid To Ask* (New York: D. McKay, 1969), 133.
[369] Howard Cruse, "Gravy on Gay," *Barefootz Funnies* no. 2 (Princeton, WS: Kitchen Sink Press, 1976).

would destroy my career."[370] Though he did not himself come out in the story, "any sensible person would assume that the person who drew it was gay" and "after time passed and it didn't seem to cause any terrible havoc, that strengthened my feeling that in the long run I was going to be an openly gay cartoonist."[371] In 1979, Cruse would be approached by Dennis Kitchen to edit the anthology *Gay Comix* no. 1, which would be his official coming out.

However, *Gay Comix* was not the first gay underground anthology. By the end of the 1970s, the gay and lesbian movement had achieved a high level of subcultural elaboration and general social tolerance. As a result, in 1976, Larry Fuller, a publisher of heterosexual pornographic comix, saw a gap in the market for an all-gay underground anthology – *Gay Heart Throbs*. Three issues of *Gay Heart Throbs* were published between 1976 and 1980.[372] Jerry Mills recalled being disappointed in the anthology because some of the stories seemed to portray "a hetero idea of what gay people are." [373] Howard Cruse similarly feels that the title "did not begin to explore the everyday lives of gay people, it was far too dependent on campy humour or sex."[374] However, *Gay Heart Throbs* indicated that there was a market for gay underground comix, and Triptow suggests that it influenced Denis Kitchen, the heterosexual publisher of Kitchen Sink Press, to inaugurate the co-gender anthology *Gay Comix* in 1980.[375]

The lesbian and gay-themed narratives that appeared in the underground comix of the 1960s were few and far between, but are important because of their emphasis on the personal and their influence on Second Wave queer alternative comics. Whilst not directly autobiographical for the most part, they are nevertheless highly personal, and even as they are influenced by – and promote – gay liberation, they do not do so in a totally unquestioning way. The underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s "constituted a genuinely romantic, highly individualistic movement that sought to liberate the comic book as a

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[370] Howard Cruse. Interview by author. Tape recording. Massachusetts, August 27th, 2008.
[371] Ibid.
[372] Larry Fuller, ed. *Gay Heart Throbs* no. 1-3 (San Francisco, CA: Ful-Horne Productions, 1976-1980).
[373] Mills quoted in Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 25.
[374] Cruse, interview, 2008.
[375] Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 25.

vehicle for personal expression";[376] First Wave LGBT cartoonists like Cruse and Gregory, who began their careers in the undergrounds, are cited by many of the Second Wave cartoonists, including Robert Kirby, Nick Leonard and Michael Fahy, as influential on the alternative queer comics they produced in the 1990s.

In addition to this, many of these early representations also contain many of the themes that would become conventionalized in what I call the "gay ghetto" comics – particularly the representation of the gay community as a welcoming safe haven, especially evident in Mary Wings' and Roberta Gregory's comix. Such representations of the gay community are central to many of the cartoons and strips which appear in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s in gay newspapers and magazines – comics which are usually set in urban gay enclaves, depict tightly-knit friendship groups, and focus on community politics and gay social and sexual mores. These various gay ghetto comics are varied in style and tone, but share a strong underlying faith in the notion of a unified gay community. Along with gay pornographic comics, the gay ghetto genre is one of the two dominant generic paradigms of the gay comics field I discuss in Chapter Four, and which many of the alternative queer comics of the 1990s would react against.

Gay Comix, 1980-1983

I will now turn to discussing *Gay Comix*, which – from its first issue in 1980 to its hiatus in 1989 – was the most prominent American anthology devoted solely to LGBT-themed comics by LGBT-identified creators. In this section, I will focus on the first five years of *Gay Comix*'s publication. Looking at this period in the anthology's publication demonstrates that the queer alternative comics of the 1990s, while reacting against many of the stereotypes and conventions of the First Wave gay ghetto and gay porno comics, also owe much to the more challenging and critical stories produced as part of the First Wave, the bulk of which were originally published in *Gay Comix*.

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[376] Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 18.

Gay Comix was published by an underground comix publisher, Kitchen Sink Press, and, in Bourdieusian terms, we could say that in its first four years, from 1980 to 1983, *Gay Comix* was firmly positioned toward the autonomous end of the field of LGBT comics. Its subject matter dealt with more serious issues and was often critical of gay orthodoxies, reflecting this position, and these early issues of *Gay Comix* are specifically cited by Second Wave cartoonist Robert Kirby as influential on his queer comics anthologies *Strange Looking Exile* and *Boy Trouble*, produced in the 1990s.

In August, 1979, Kitchen approached Howard Cruse to edit the first issue of *Gay Comix*. Cruse accepted Kitchen's offer, and the two men sent out a form letter asking for contributions to a new gay anthology to every cartoonist they could think of, because for the most part they did not know who was lesbian, gay or bisexual.[377]

In 1980, Kitchen Sink Press published *Gay Comix* no. 1, which was to be the first of four issues Cruse would edit before passing the mantle on to Robert Triptow in 1984. Cruse wanted the new anthology to break with the tone of the gay underground anthology that had preceded it, Larry Fuller's *Gay Heart Throbs*:

> I felt [*Gay Heart Throbs*] did not begin to explore the everyday lives of gay people. It was far too dependent on campy humour or sex, and I really wanted to get past those aspects that had been largely dominant in gay cartooning. So my feeling is that *Gay Comix* was groundbreaking, but not for being gay. I think it was groundbreaking in the way it tried to include more substantial themes than *Gay Heart Throbs* had included.[378]

Cruse wanted the contributors of *Gay Comix* to present "stories about actual lives instead of about a limiting view of gays as existing in a perpetual world of

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[377] Cruse, interview. See also Dave Schreiner, *Kitchen Sink Press: The First 25 Years* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1994), 53-4, and Howard Cruse, "Editor's Notes," *Gay Comics* no. 25, Spring 1998, 3.
[378] Ibid.

camp, or in a perpetual world of successful pornographic sex" rather than, as he says, "a world of frustrated sex where most of us live."[379]

From the first issue of *Gay Comix*, Cruse's editorial policy stressed freedom of expression and an emphasis on the personal, rather than political agendas. While many of the stories in the early *Gay Comix* issues were certainly influenced by the impact of Gay Liberation, Cruse says, "I didn't want *Gay Comix* to just be a propaganda piece for the gay movement . . . I do not find propaganda interesting, it has no surprises."[380] The majority of stories in the early era of *Gay Comix*[381] contrast with the majority of cartoons and strips being published in gay newspapers and magazines at the same time. While they often retain a light tone, for the most part they eschew campy humour and titillating depictions of sex, instead exploring more difficult subjects that divided the lesbian/gay community.

For example, "Another Coming-Out Story" by Roberta Gregory dealt with alcoholism within the lesbian community,[382] while the theme of bisexuality was addressed by Lee Marrs in "Stick in the Mud."[383] Another *Gay Comix* contributor, Alison Bechdel, began her ongoing serial *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1983. From the outset, it included a number of black, Asian and Latina lesbians along with whites, and as the series evolved, Bechdel included characters who engaged in a variety of sexual practices including SM and butch/femme role-play, and who identified as bisexual, transgender, or genderqueer. Jennifer Camper addressed a range of issues relating to gender, ethnicity and class in her work; her strips also often deal with lesbian sexuality in a wildly irreverent manner.[384] Bechdel's and Camper's representations of sex constitute an explicitintervention in the debates around "contentious" sexual practices in the

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[379] Ibid.
[380] Ibid.
[381] Howard Cruse, ed., *Gay Comix* no. 1-4 (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1980-1983).
[382] Roberta Gregory, "Another Coming Out Story", *Gay Comix* no. 3, ed. Howard Cruse (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1981), np.
[383] Lee Marrs, "Stick in the Mud", *Gay Comix* no. 1, ed. Howard Cruse (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1980), np.
[384] Camper's work has been collected in Jennifer Camper, *Rude Girls and Dangerous Women* (New York: Laugh Lines Press, 1994).

lesbian community in the 1980s that came to be known as the "lesbian sex wars."[385]

Gay male cartoonists also addressed contentious issues within the gay male community. Burton Clarke's "Cy Ross and the S.Q. Syndrome" from *Gay Comix* no. 1, published in 1980, told the story of a gay black man's internalized racism.[386] Vaughn Frick's *Watch Out* comics, published in *The San Francisco Sentinel* in the early 80s, satirized San Francisco gay politics and questioned what he saw as "politically correct" reactions of some gay groups to the AIDS crisis.[387] Howard Cruse's story "Billy Goes Out" from *Gay Comix* no. 1 is a complex depiction of a young man's loneliness on the commercial gay scene, which offers little more than casual encounters (**Fig. 3-6**),[388] while his story "Dirty Old Lovers" from *Gay Comix* no. 3 in 1982 is critical of the tendency for certain gay political groups to promote a narrow, conservative notion of "positive role models" for the gay community.[389] "Safe Sex" in *Gay Comix* no. 4 is a chaotic non-linear narrative in which Cruse attempts to deal with the multifaceted nature of the AIDS epidemic.[390]

In this way, then, the early issues of *Gay Comix* can be seen as precursors to the queer alternative comics that would emerge in the early 1990s with an emphasis on personal experience, often autobiographical stories, and critiques of gay culture. Second and Third Wave queer alternative cartoonists such as Robert Kirby, Michael Fahy, Nick Leonard and Justin Hall have cited First Wave artists associated with *Gay Comix* – Cruse, Gregory, Bechdel and Camper – as influences on their work, and indeed Kirby cites the first four, Cruse-edited issues of *Gay Comix* as influential on his own editorial policy for *Strange Looking Exile* and *Boy Trouble*, which were the most prominent queer alternative comics anthologies throughout the 1990s. While the Second- and Third Wave queer

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[385] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 64.
[386] Burton Clarke, "Cy Ross and the S.Q. Syndrome", *Gay Comix* no. 1, ed. Howard Cruse (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1980), np. Reprinted in Hall, *No Straight Lines*, 70-74.
[387] Frick's comics were collected in Vaughn Frick, *Watch Out Comix* no. 1 (San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp, 1986).
[388] Howard Cruse, "Billy Goes Out", *Gay Comix* no. 1 (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1980), np. Reprinted in Hall, *No Straight Lines*, 38-44.
[389] Howard Cruse, "Dirty Old Lovers", *Gay Comix* no. 3 (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1982), np.
[390] Howard Cruse, "Safe Sex", *Gay Comix* no. 4 (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1983), np.

cartoonists certainly reacted against the conventions and stereotypes established in pre-Stonewall and First Wave gay comics, many of them, nevertheless, were also inspired by these older artists. An awareness of this is important in order to complicate any oversimplified sense of a "generational" struggle between LGBT cartoonists.

Fig. 3-6 – Howard Cruse, "Billy Goes Out." *No Straight Lines*, 42.

Gay Comix, 1984-1988

In this section, I will argue that the tone of *Gay Comix* changed significantly with the arrival of Triptow as editor with no. 5, and with the change of publisher from no. 6, from Kitchen Sink Press to Bob Ross, editor of the *Bay Area Reporter*. As Jean-Paul Jennequin puts it, *Gay Comix* came to be dominated by "straightforwardly humorous comic strips which present[ed] good-natured satires of gay life"[391] – by what I have called the "gay ghetto" genre, and the anthology became increasingly mainstreamed and over-all less critical of gay culture. Along with *Meatmen*, the only other anthology devoted to gay male comics – and which was predominantly pornographic – *Gay Comix* was the foremost gay comics anthology in the 1980s, and virtually defined the field throughout this decade. The queer male alternative comics creators of the 1990s, then, responded to the genre conventions of the gay ghetto and gay porno comics found in *Gay Comix*, *Meatmen*, and the various gay magazines and newspapers that featured comic strips throughout the 1980s.

Around the same time that Triptow took over as editor of *Gay Comix*, Dennis Kitchen encountered financial problems and was no longer able to publish the anthology. Bob Ross of San Francisco's *Bay Area Reporter* took over as publisher from Kitchen with no. 6.[392] Triptow says he wanted to carry on Cruse's focus on more serious, emotionally complex stories, but he also wanted to emphasize humour; the HIV/AIDS epidemic, too, had a huge impact on Triptow's editorial policy.[393]

In the summer of 1981, an article appeared in the *New York Times* headlined "Rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals": doctors in New York City and Los Angeles reported the first manifestations of unexplainable sickness and death among gay men.[394] The mysterious illness was originally termed GRID

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[391] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 40.
[392] Robert Triptow, ed., *Gay Comix* no. 5 (Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1984) and 6-13 (San Francisco, CA: Bob Ross, 1985-1988).
[393] Triptow, interview with author, 2008.
[394] Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, 46.

(Gay Related Immunodeficiency) but re-named AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in 1982,[395] and by mid-decade was linked to a previously unknown retrovirus – HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).[396] In Britain, gay cartoonist Don Melia responded to the AIDS pandemic by compiling the first HIV/AIDS benefit comic, *Strip AIDS* in 1987.[397] American cartoonists Trina Robbins, Robert Triptow and Bill Sienkiewicz edited an American version, *Strip AIDS USA*, in 1988.[398] In 1988, heterosexual British comics writer Alan Moore formed Mad Love, his own publishing company, to release an anthology entitled *AARGH! (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia)* and raise funds to fight Clause 28, a British law designed to outlaw the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities.[399]

Triptow was offered the editorship of *Gay Comix* in 1984, "right around the time that AIDS had been making its first major impact and the party had ended."[400] He remembers the mid-1980s as "one of the worst periods of my life, because everyone I knew was dying."[401] Triptow wanted to present stories that "challenged orthodox thinking" within the gay community, but also to "try to humanize us in the middle of discrimination and disease."[402] Triptow himself produced stories comparable to the Cruse-edited era, including "I Know You Are But What Am I?" – a dark and moving story about a gay child growing up in a reactionary environment (**Fig. 3-7**).[403]

However, as Jennequin argues, Triptow's editorial policy "open[ed] the door to more straightforwardly humorous comic strips,"[404] of the kind I have called "gay ghetto" comics, sometimes reprinted directly from community newspapers. While these comics do not exclude discussion of serious subjects like homophobia and AIDS, Jennequin contends that their humorous tone tends

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[395] Ibid.
[396] Weeks, *Coming Out*, 245.
[397] Don Melia, ed., *Strip AIDS* (London: Willyprods/Small Time Ink, 1987).
[398] Trina Robbins, Robert Triptow and Bill Sienkiewicz, *Strip AIDS USA* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1989).
[399] Debbie Delano and Phyllis Moore, eds., *AARGH!* (Northampton: Mad Love, 1988).
[400] Triptow, interview.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid.
[403] Robert Triptow, "I Know You Are But What Am I?", *Gay Comix* no. 10 (San Francisco, CA: Bob Ross, 1987). Reprinted in Hall, *No Straight Lines*, 75-81.
[404] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 40.

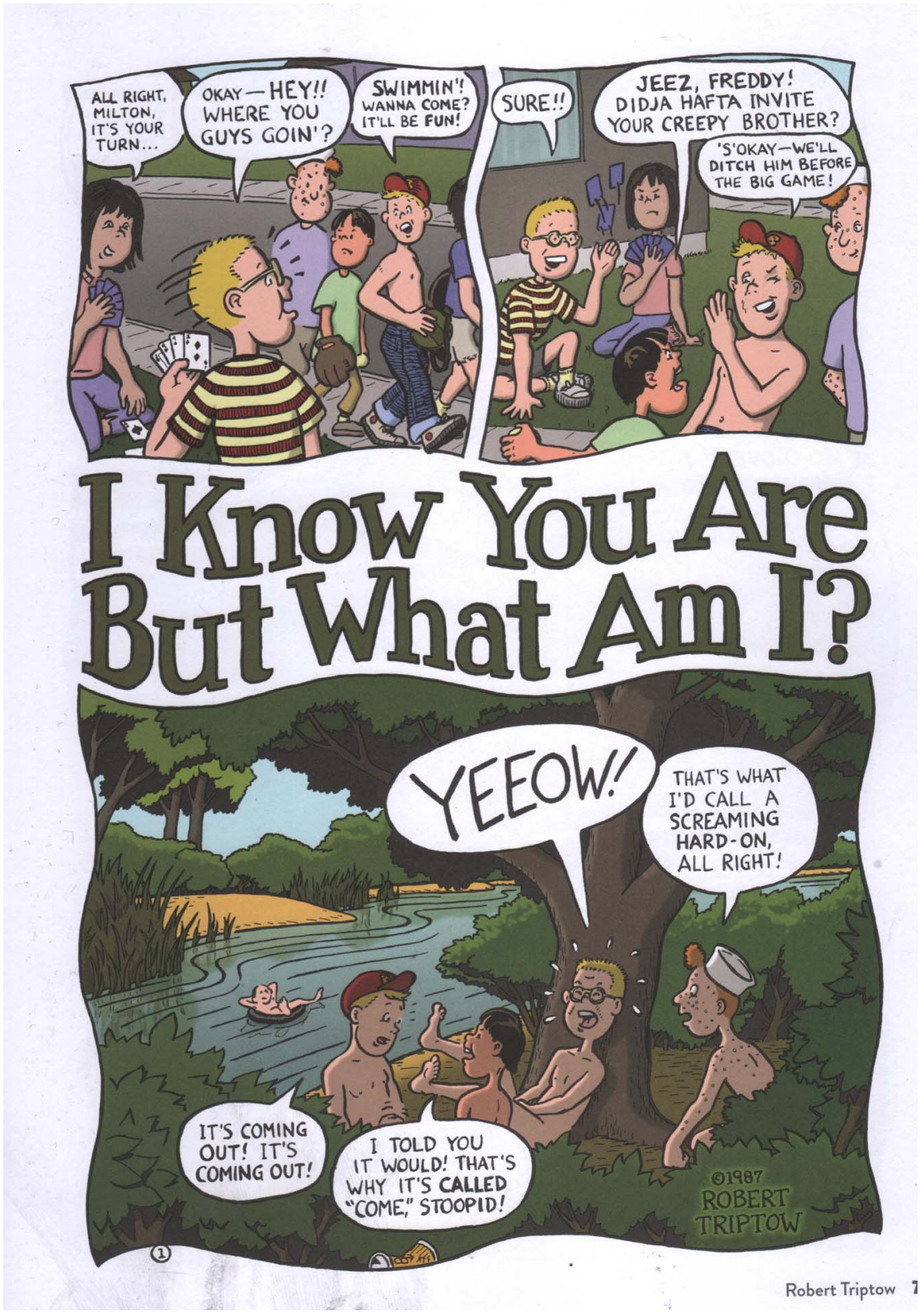

Fig. 3-7 – Robert Triptow, "I Know You Are But What Am I?" *No Straight Lines*, 75.

"to defuse the anxiety such issues can arouse."[405] It is clear from Triptow's comments in his interview with me that this was intentional. However, as Jennequin notes, other factors also contribute to a growing sense of "normalization" or mainstreaming of *Gay Comix* under Triptow's editorship, not least the assumption of publishing by a gay publisher, Bob Ross.[406]

When Ross replaced Dennis Kitchen as publisher, we could say that, in Bourdieu's terms, *Gay Comix* began to move toward the heteronomous pole of the LGBT comics field, joining the cartoons and strips published in the commercial gay press and becoming similar to them. Reflecting this new more commercial position, then, *Gay Comix* as a whole becomes less critical of mainstream gay culture, its excessive commercialization, its focus on youth and physical "perfection," and its reproduction of other inequalities within heterosexual society. Whilst "[o]riginally transgressive in its project," as Jennequin puts it, "*Gay Comix* eventually, to some degree, comes to "toe the line."[407]

Gay Comix went on hiatus after the publication of its twelfth issue in 1988, due to editor Triptow's ill health, and difficulties with the publisher.[408] The thirteenth issue had been edited by Triptow and was intended for a summer/autumn release but was delayed until summer, 1991. However, between 1980 and 1988, *Gay Comix* was the preeminent venue for the publication of LGBT-themed comics by LGBT-identified creators; the only other publications to feature comics were gay and lesbian magazines and newspapers, which typically featured just one or two strips per issue. In 1986, *Gay Comix* was joined by *Meatmen*, an anthology published by Winston Leyland, which was published annually in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, even after *Gay Comix* went on hiatus in 1989.[409] The anthology predominantly featured examples of the gay porno genre, including re-prints of Tom of

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[405] Ibid.
[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Triptow, interview.
[409] Winston Leyland, ed., *Meatmen*, vol. 1-26 (San Francisco, CA: GS Press/Leyland Publications, 1986-2004).

Finland's sequential narratives, as well as work by The Hun, Sean, Stephen, and so on.

Meatmen and the latter era of *Gay Comix* featured many comics and cartoons that fall within the dominant genres of "gay porno" and "gay ghetto" respectively. Along with the comic strips and cartoons featured in gay newspapers and magazines, *Gay Comix* and *Meatmen*, together virtually defined the field of gay male comics in the late 1980s. Therefore, it was these comics that the emerging creators of the queer male alternative comics in the 1990s would look to for inspiration, and it was the stereotypes and conventions of the gay porno and gay ghetto genres that they responded to, worked with, and reacted against.

The Ghettoization of LGBT Comics in the 1980s

The First Wave of LGBT comics that appeared in the late 1970s, and in greater numbers through the 1980s, tended to appear in comics anthologies, as well as in gay and lesbian newsletters, newspapers and magazines, locally, nationally and internationally. *Gay Comix* and *Wimmen's Comix* were the main venues for gay and lesbian comics work, and there were few other venues for publishing LGBT comics. As Andy Mangels demonstrated in a series of articles for the comics fanzine *Amazing Heroes*, the mainstream comics industry was at the time quite homophobic in an institutional sense: although there were of course LGBT people working for large comics publishers like Marvel and DC, few felt comfortable enough to be out at work. Also the Comics Code Authority, as well as the editorial policy of certain editors, prohibited positive representations of openly gay characters.[410]

The early 1980s also saw the flourishing of adult-oriented "alternative comics" which tended to feature satirical, political and autobiographical themes inherited from the underground comix. As Hatfield describes, they were "clearly indebted to the [underground] comix of yesteryear"[411] with many creators

[410] See Mangels, "Out of the Closet" Parts I & II.
[411] Hatfield, *Alternative*, 20.

aiming for work that was both more subtle and more complex than was typical of the undergrounds. However, for the most part the alternatives, too, tended to focus on heterosexual creators and themes. The publishing house Fantagraphics, founded in the late 1970s, was instrumental in establishing a new audience for more serious comics aimed at adults. They published the work of a new generation of artists, reprinted a number of historical comics that had fallen into obscurity, and created a magazine for the critical discussion of comics, *The Comics Journal*, in 1977.

Despite their similarities to the more well-known alternative comics of the 1980s and 1990s, the work of prominent LGBT cartoonists such as Cruse and Bechdel has tended to be overlooked by critics writing for publications such as *The Comics Journal*, who have – until very recently - overwhelmingly focused on the work of heterosexual creators. In addition to the bias of these mostly straight male comics critics, this oversight may also be due to lack of awareness of the work of LGBT cartoonists. As noted, LGBT-themed comics tended to be published in gay and lesbian publications, which were distributed via gay bookstores rather than the comics specialty shops where the vast majority of comic books appeared. Therefore, the LGBT comics field was effectively ghettoized. Many fans, critics, and even Second- and Third Wave artists have been unaware of the many LGBT creators who produced work throughout the 1980s.

In the mid-to-late 1980s, a number of independently-published alternative comics featuring LGBT themes began appearing. The Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets*, created by heterosexual cartoonists, nevertheless featured complex and sympathetic portrayals of LGBT characters.[412] Ivan Velez Jr.'s *Tales of the Closet* told the gritty story of a close-knit group of LGBT high school students from a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds. Starting in 1988, Donna Barr's idiosyncratic series *Desert Peach* depicted the WWII adventures of Rommel's gay brother.[413] Bisexual cartoonist Angela Bocage

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[412] Hernandez Brothers, *Love and Rockets* no. 1-50 (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 1982-1996).
[413] Barr's entire *Desert Peach* series has recently been collected in two volumes thus far. See Donna Barr, *The Desert Peach Collection*, vol. 1-2 (Seattle, WA: Fine Line Press, 2013).

began editing *Real Girl*, published by Fantagraphics, in 1989.[414] Bocage subtitled the anthology "the sex comic for all genders and orientations, by artists who are good in bed." The expansive approach to sexuality and gender suggested by *Real Girl*'s subtitle resonated with the emergence of "queer" in a number of distinct but overlapping spheres – the worlds of radical queer activism, academic queer theory, and the queercore subculture.

Queercore Subculture and Queer Zines

As discussed in Chapter Two, the term "queer" was reclaimed by activists and subcultural participants in the late 1980s, and today, in popular discourses, it is often divorced from many of its socio-political and subcultural connotations, and functions simply as a synonym for terms like LGBT. In academic discourses, "queer" is often represented as indeterminate and resistant to definition. For example, Michael Warner opines, "It may very well be impossible for the sentence 'I am queer' to be false." [415] However, Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman point out that within the queercore subculture, the term "queer" was used to *emphatically* distinguish its members "from dominant straight culture and lesbian/gay parent culture alike."[416]

Queercore, sometimes referred to as "homocore" or "queer-punk," emerged from within both the mainstream gay scene and the sometimes homophobic punk scene in North America. Most histories of queercore recognize the Toronto-based publication *JDs* (short for "Juvenile Delinquents"), which began in 1985, as probably "the first queer zine" proper.[417] *JDs* was

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[414] Angela Bocage, ed., *Real Girl* no. 1-9 (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 1990-1997).
[415] Michael Warner, "Something Queer About the Nation-State," *Alphabet City*, No. 3 (1993), 14.
[416] Michael Du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman, "Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture," *College Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (February 1997), 46.
[417] See for example Mark Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines: Identity, Community, and The Articulation of Homosexuality and Hardcore," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Winter 1993); Viviane K. Namaste, "The Use and Abuse of Queer Tropes: Metaphor and Catachresis in Queer Theory and Politics," *Social Semiotics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1999); and Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 2005). Spencer's book is also valuable for a broader discussion of zine culture; for more on zines see also Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1997); Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 2002); and Teal Triggs, *Fanzines* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010). For a discussion of the connections between zine culture and independent

produced in collaboration by lesbian underground artist and filmmaker, G.B. Jones, and her gay male friend, Bruce LaBruce; LaBruce would later garner overground recognition as a director of films like *Super 8½* (1994) and *Hustler White* (1996), which are often considered part of the "New Queer Cinema" movement,[418] even as he distanced himself from that label.[419] As Amy Spencer describes, gay and lesbian punk rock fans "felt dissatisfied with the options of either participating in the hardcore punk scene or the mainstream gay scene," neither of which "was willing to accept them fully."[420] Through their zine *JDs*, as well as articles in the high-profile punk zine *Maximumrocknroll*, Jones and LaBruce issued an "almost militant . . . call for a place for queers like themselves within punk culture," and "simultaneously attacked both punk and gay subcultures for failing to extend the boundaries of sexual politics."[421]

Du Plessis and Chapman explain that "[d]irect and indirect participation" in the queercore subculture "was facilitated by the variety of media through which this collectivity imagined itself" – the production of alternative clubs and festivals, music (both live and recorded), videos, films, some novels, and, most significantly for this study, a plethora of queer zines.[422] Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, du Plessis and Chapman argue that the queercore subculture functioned in a similar way to traditional Western avant-gardes. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu argues that any field is defined by struggles over difference and distinction. Du Plessis and Chapman explain queercore's "sense of 'us versus them' and of an absolute inside against a monolithic outside" as one such struggle over distinction.[423] According to Bourdieu, to "make one's name" (*faire date*) in a particular field of cultural production "means making one's mark, achieving recognition … of one's difference from other producers,

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comics culture see Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs, eds., *Below Critical Radar* (Hove: Slab-O-Concrete, 2004).

[418] Glyn Davis, "Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director: Case Study – Gregg Araki," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 54.

[419] Bruce LaBruce, "The Wild, Wild World of Fanzines: Notes from a Reluctant Pornographer," in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 186-195.

[420] Spencer, *DIY,* 39.

[421] Ibid, 276-277.

[422] Du Plessis and Chapman, "Queercore", 46.

[423] Ibid., 49.

especially the most consecrated of them; at the same time, it means creating a new position beyond the positions presently occupied, ahead of them, in the avant-garde."[424] Queercore, then, works to deny the legitimacy of the "consecrated" public sphere represented by dominant gay culture; to stress an internal coherence around the differences of its own participants; and to open a "queer counter-public sphere in opposition to the institutions of the lesbian and/or gay public sphere already in existence" via queer zines, clubs, music and other subcultural practices.[425]

As Viviane K. Namaste points out, queer zine discourses often "invoke the word 'queer' as one term to describe an anti-authoritarian political position" as well as to refer to gender and sexual practices outside of the heterosexual norm.[426] Queercore participants did not simply use the term "queer" as a synonym for "lesbian and gay," but also to describe an anti-authoritarian political position; queer zines often critiqued mainstream gay culture for its assimilationist politics, its gender separatism and male bias, its exclusion of sexual and gender nonconformists (bisexuals, transgendered people, sadomasochists), its blindness to class and racial differences among queer people, and its increasingly commercialized, consumerist character. Matias Viegener emphasizes that queercore's rejection of mainstream gay culture is both political and stylistic: "for every direct or declarative challenge queer punks make against social hegemony, another indirect one is lodged in terms of style."[427] Hence, as Viegener notes, queercore discourses tended to construct an image of the gay mainstream by invoking cultural commodities and practices, including "disco, gay marriages, *The Advocate*, polo shirts, David Leavitt's fiction, and Calvin Klein advertisements" as well as films such as *Desert Hearts*, *Parting Glances* and *Personal Best.*[428] To use Bourdieu's terms, these queer zines reject the dominant gay habitus and seek to construct and

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[424] Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 106.
[425] Du Plessis and Chapman, "Queercore," 46.
[426] Namaste, "Use and Abuse," 228.
[427] Matias Viegener, "'The Only Haircut that Makes Sense Anymore': Queer Subculture and Gay Resistance," in Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar, eds., *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 117.
[428] Ibid. See also Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines," 81.

legitimize an alternative, queer punk habitus. In queer zines, the gay mainstream is represented as queercore's despised "other," a stifling and homogenous edifice.

Yet even as it defined itself, often aggressively, *against* gay mainstream culture, the queercore subculture was nevertheless internally diverse. As queer novelist Dennis Cooper described in his *Village Voice* essay "Queercore" in 1992, the subculture's participants included "several thousand … quirky outcasts – punk rockers, film buffs, artists, bookworms" as well as band members, filmmakers, "countless performance artists; writers, club kids, and activists."[429] Queercore participants attempt "to construct an alternate culture in and around" dominant straight and gay cultures and, for them, the term "queer" signified "the freedom to personalize anything you see or hear and then shoot it back into the stupid world more distorted and amazing than it was before."[430] This autonomy of creative expression was of particular relevance for the alternative queer cartoonists who emerged in the 1990s as part of the Second Wave of LGBT comics.

Seminal queer zine *JDs* often featured cartoons and comic strips, including early work by cartoonist Carrie McNinch, and Tony Arena's first "Anonymous Boy" cartoons.[431] Other important and influential queer zines soon appeared, including the San Francisco-based *Homocore*, established by Tom Jennings and Deke Nihilson in 1988,[432] and the Minneapolis-based *Holy Titclamps*, created by Larry-bob Roberts, in 1989.[433] Though *Holy Titclamps* was primarily a literary zine, it also featured comics, including the satirical cartoons of Nick Leonard. Cartoonists like McNinch, Arena, and Leonard can be seen as among the first in what I call the "Second Wave" of LGBT comics and creators.

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[429] Dennis Cooper, "Queercore," in *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader,* ed. Donald Morten (Boulder, Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), 292.
[430] Cooper, "Queercore," 295.
[431] G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce, eds., *JDs* no. 1-8 (Toronto, Canada: Self-published, 1985-1991).
[432] Tom Jennings and Deke Nihilson, eds., *Homocore* no. 1-7 (San Francisco, CA: Self-published, 1988-1991).
[433] Larry-bob Roberts, ed., *Holy Titclamps* no. 1-9 (Minneapolis, MN: Self-published, 1989-1992) and 10-19 (San Francisco, CA: Self-published, 1992-2003).

The 1990s and the 2000s – Second Wave and Third Wave Comics

The 1990s saw the rise of a new generation of LGBT comics and creators – the Second Wave. Some of these cartoonists continued the traditions of the gay ghetto and gay porno comics traditions. Others, influenced by the queer cultural turn and by the rise of alternative comics and zine culture, and feeling disenfranchised from mainstream gay media and culture, began to create comics that took up and subverted the conventions of these dominant generic paradigms.

Meatmen and *Gay Comix* continued to be published throughout the 1990s. In 1991, in the USA, Bob Ross approached Andy Mangels, one of the few openly gay men working in the mainstream comics industry, and asked him to edit *Gay Comix.* No. 14 was published in 1991.[434] With no. 15, Mangels changed the spelling of the comic's title to *Gay Comics*, which he hoped would have the effect of bringing the series "out of the underground" and linking it more strongly to the mainstream comics industry.[435] The series was edited by Mangels till it ceased publication with its twenty-fifth issue in 1998.[436]

In 1991, in the United Kingdom, Don Melia began publishing *Buddies*, intended to be a British version of *Gay Comix*. Melia died of AIDS in 1992 and editorship passed briefly to Bob Lynch with the third issue and then to Howard Stangroom with the fourth. The sixth and final issue came out in 1999.[437] An all-lesbian British comics anthology, *Bosom Buddies*, edited by Linda Gibson, debuted in 1992 but only lasted one issue.[438] In 1993 and 1994, the alternative comics publisher Fanny produced two issues of *Dyke's Delight*, which featured

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[434] Andy Mangels, ed., *Gay Comix* no. 14 (San Francisco, CA: Bob Ross, 1991).
[435] Andy Mangels, "From the Editor", *Gay Comics* no. 15 (San Francisco, CA: Bob Ross, Spring 1998), np.
[436] Andy Mangels, ed. *Gay Comics* no. 15-25 (San Francisco, CA: Bob Ross, Spring1992-Spring1998).
[437] Don Melia, ed., *Buddies* no. 1-2 (London: Pretend Family Productions, 1991-1992); Bob Lynch, ed., *Buddies* no. 3 (London: Pretend Family Productions, 1993); Howard Stangroom, ed. *Buddies* no. 4-6 (London: Pretend Family Productions, 1994-1996)
[438] Linda Gibson, ed., *Bosom Buddies* no. 1 (London: Pretend Family Productions, 1992).

American cartoonists such as Jennifer Camper and Roberta Gregory along with home-grown talent such as Kate Charlesworth and Grizelda Grizlingham.[439]

Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, many of the First Wave gay cartoonists found it increasingly difficult to find venues for publishing their work. Robert Triptow suggests that he and other older cartoonists were perhaps considered "too underground" or dated for the new *Gay Comics*, or for the new gay glossy magazines that emerged during the 1990s.[440] Others found the rates-per-page that gay magazines were willing to pay for comic strips to be unacceptable with the rising cost of living throughout the 1980s and1990s. Howard Cruse, for example, decided to end *Wendel* in 1989 because *The Advocate* were not able to agree to an increase to his per-episode rate at contract renewal time.[441] Cruse spent the first half of the 1990s creating *Stuck Rubber Baby*, a 210-page graphic novel which was published by DC's Paradox Press in 1995.[442] The semi-autobiographical *Stuck Rubber Baby* is one of Cruse's most complex works. It tells the story of Toland Polk, a white gay man growing up in the American South in the 1960s and confronting his own same-sex desires, the racism experienced by his black friends, and the consequences of fathering a child.

By the early 1990s, however, the Second Wave of LGBT cartoonists was beginning to emerge. Some of these cartoonists continued the traditions of the gay ghetto and gay porno comics traditions. Others, influenced by the queer cultural turn and by the rise of alternative comics and zine culture, began to create comics that took up and subverted these dominant genre conventions. These queer alternative cartoonists did not necessarily seek or desire incorporation into the mainstream. Some of them were influenced by the older gay and lesbian cartoonists featured in the early *Gay Comix*. But others were relatively unaware of the gay cartoonists of the 1970s and 1980s, having only been exposed to the work of a few of them fleetingly in LGBT newspapers. Many of these newer queer cartoonists were far more influenced by the work of

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[439] Cath Tate and Carol Bennett, eds., *Dyke's Delight* no. 1-2 (London: Fanny, 1993-1994).
[440] Triptow, interview.
[441] Cruse, interview.
[442] Howard Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* (New York: Paradox Press, 1995).

the mainly heterosexual cartoonists appearing in the comics published by prominent alternative comics publishers, such as Fantagraphics Books and Drawn & Quarterly, as well as by the politics and DIY aesthetics of the queercore subculture and queer zines, as discussed earlier.

In the late 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s, a number of lesbian and bisexual female cartoonists began producing self-syndicated comic strips and cartoons, as well as self-published comix-zines, many of them autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. They included Joan Hilty's "Immola and the Luna Legion" stories;[443] Ellen Forney's *Tomato*;[444] Diane Reum's *Tomboy*;[445] Terry Sapp's *Adventures of Baby Dyke*;[446] Carrie McNinch's diary comic *The Assassin and the Whiner*;[447] and Ariel Schrag's graphic novels *Awkward*, *Definition*, and *Potential*.[448] Diane DiMassa created one of the most popular – and most overtly politicised – of the lesbian alternative comics of the 1990s, the notorious *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*.[449]

Early lesbian comix-zine anthologies included Michelle Rau's *Lana's World*[450] and Roxxie's *Girljock*,[451] which began sporadic publication in 1989 and 1990 respectively. In December 1992, Canadian cartoonist Hope began publishing *Oh…*, a lesbian comics anthology that lasted twenty-two issues.[452] Bocage's *Real Girl* was also important for the way that she deliberately mixed stories by more established cartoonists, many of whom were heterosexual, involved with the more professional alternative comics scene, with work by

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[443] Joan Hilty, "Immola and the Luna Legion", *Oh…* no. 8, ed. Hope Barrett (Canada: B. Publications, 1992), np.
[444] Ellen Forney, *Tomato* no. 1-2 (Seattle, WA: Starhead Comix, 1994-1995).
[445] Diane Reum, "Tomboy", *Oh…* no. 9, ed. Hope Barrett (Canada: B. Publications, 1992), np.
[446] Terry Sapp, *Adventures of Baby Dyke* no. 1-2 (San Francisco, CA: Self-published, 1992).
[447] Carrie McNinch, *The Assassin and the Whiner* no. 1-16 (Los Angeles, CA: Self-published, 1995-2004).
[448] Schrag's comics were originally self-published and later released as graphic novels by Slave Labor Graphics. More recently they have been republished by Simon & Schuster/Touchstone. See Ariel Schrag, *Awkward and Definition* (New York: Touchstone, 2008); Ariel Schrag, *Potential* (New York: Touchstone, 2009).
[449] Dianne DiMassa, *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* no. 1-21 (New Haven CT: Giant Ass Publishing 1991-1996); Diane DiMassa, *The Complete Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 1999).
[450] Michelle Rau, *Lana's World* no. 1-11 (Eugene, OR: Self-published, 1989-1991).
[451] Roxxie, ed.,*Girljock* no. 1-16 (San Francisco, CA: Girljock, 1990-1998); Roxxie, ed., *Girljock: The Book* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).
[452] Hope Barrett, *Oh…* no. 1-22 (Canada: B. Publications, 1992-1998.

queer cartoonists involved in self-publishing. Such anthologies were important in that they gave a number of less well-known lesbian cartoonists the chance to see their work in print and encouraged communication and cross-fertilization between various queer female cartoonists. The cartoonist Andrea Natalie was also instrumental in this regard. Natalie began self-syndicating her single-panel satirical cartoons, entitled "Stonewall Riots," in 1989.[453] In 1990, Natalie founded the Lesbian Cartoonists Network "to encourage support and communication between lesbian cartoonists"; the LCN was an invaluable resource for connecting these often-isolated new artists with more established cartoonists.[454]

The efforts of the LCN, as well as encounters with zines like *Holy Titclamps*, *Lana's World* and *Girljock*, inspired an aspiring Minneapolis-based cartoonist named Robert Kirby to put together his own comic, *Strange Looking Exile,* subtitled "the all-cartoon zine for queer dudes and babes." Kirby published five issues of *SLE* between 1991 and 1994.[455] While the first issue of *SLE* was composed wholly of Kirby's work, in its introduction he invited other queer cartoonists to submit work. The following four issues featured work by established cartoonists, such as Alison Bechdel and Roberta Gregory, along with relative newcomers, like the aforementioned Roxxie, Rau, Leonard, Sapp, DiMassa and Franson.

In the US, Robert Kirby stopped publishing *Strange Looking Exile* around 1994, but quite soon after decided to edit a new queer comics anthology, this time focused on queer male alternative cartoonists, and titled *Boy Trouble*. As mentioned before, the only other all-male gay anthology, *Meatmen*, was predominantly pornographic, and under Andy Mangels' editorship, *Gay Comics* had become a more mainstream property; Mangels tended to favour heroic fantasy and depictions of gay ghetto life. Some of the newer alternative queer cartoonists were occasionally involved in these anthologies, Robert Kirby and

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[453] Andrea Natalie, *The Night Audrey's Vibrator Spoke: A Stonewall Riots Collection* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 1992); Andrea Natalie, *Rubfruit Mountain: A Stonewall Riots Collection* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 1993).
[454] Warren, *Dyke Strippers*, 152.
[455] Robert Kirby, ed., *Strange Looking Exile* no. 1-3 (Minneapolis,. MN: Self-published, 1991-1992) and 4-5 (New Haven, CT: Giant Ass Publishing, 1992-1994).

Jon Macy occasionally contributing to *Gay Comics*, and Macy to *Meatmen*, but, for the most part, these artists tended to produce their own comics via self-publishing or independent presses.

The 1990s had also seen the emergence of the gay market, with gay and lesbian consumers being aggressively targeted both by "heterosexual," and gay and lesbian producers and advertisers. Gay magazines also changed during this period, becoming more commercial or "heteronomous" to use Bourdieu's phrase. As Katherine Sender has argued, the advertising and editorial content of these magazines tended to promote the idea of a unified gay community while at the same time promoting certain patterns of consumption. It represented only certain "desirable" and marketable kinds of gay and lesbian identities. These identities are usually white and middle-class, and often male. They come to "stand in" for or represent the whole LGBT community, "eras[ing] both the real diversity and the political potential of queer lives" and limiting what comes to be as imaginable as "authentic" gay identity, both to the heterosexual world and to LGBT people themselves.[456]

The alternative comics by queer male artists that emerged throughout the 1990s generally stood in counterpoint to the glossy gay magazines that emerged in the same decade. They include Jon Macy's dark, surreal *Tropo*;[457] Tony Arena's punky, sexy *Anonymous Boy*;[458] and the comics of artists such as Michael Fahy, David Kelly, and Andy Hartzell, who were published regularly in Robert Kirby's *Boy Trouble*. Queer alternative comics like these represented a quiet challenge to the homogeneity and conformity of dominant gay culture. They took up and subverted the conventions of the gay ghetto and gay porno genres and represented queer subcultural lives on the peripheries of the gay mainstream that the new gay glossies rarely represented.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of a new Third Wave of LGBT comics production, but also less availability of venues for the publication of these comics in traditional print media. *Gay Comics*

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[456] Sender, *Business*,173.
[457] Jon Macy, *Tropo* no. 1-7 (Austin, TX: Blackbird Comics, 1990-1992).
[458] Tony Arena, *Anonymous Boy Collection* no. 1-8 (New York: Self-published, 1993-1999).

suspended publication with its twenty-fifth issue in 1998, after eighteen years; *Meatmen* suspended publication with its twenty-sixth volume in 2005; and the fifth and final issue of *Boy Trouble* came out in 2004 (though it was followed by two collections).

The Third Wave included cartoonists who carried on the traditions of conventional gay ghetto and gay porno comics, as well as artists who continued to challenge and subvert these genre conventions. More mainstream gay ghetto comics produced during the Third Wave included syndicated strips, most of which appeared nationally and internationally in gay newspapers and magazines, as well as on the Internet: Eric Orner's *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green*,[459] Greg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*,[460] Michael Derry's *Troy*,[461] and Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys*.[462] The gay porno comics tradition was also continued in the Third Wave by artists like Patrick Fillion, who established his own company, Class Comics, to publish a range of glossy homoerotic comics by himself and others. Since 2002, the German publisher Bruno Gmünder have published a number of lavishly produced hardcover books featuring erotic illustrations and strips by artists including Fillion and others.[463] Class Comics and Bruno Gmünder can be seen as serving the gap in the market left by Leyland's *Meatmen*.

A new, Third Wave of more alternative queer male cartoonists also emerged in the early 2000s. Many of their concerns were in line with the personal slice-of-life stories favoured by a lot of the 1990s cartoonists associated with *Boy Trouble*. They often told stories of punky, alternative queer men, and included series like Matt Fagan's *Love*,[464] Rio Safari's *Homobody*,[465]

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[459] Orner's comics were collected in a number of volumes such as Eric Orner, *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).
[460] Fox's strip has been collected in a series of volumes including Greg Fox, *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast* (Northport, New York: Sugar Maple Press, 2012).
[461] Michael Derry, *Troy: The Whole Shebang* (Los Angeles, CA: Derry Products, 2013).
[462] Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth, *Chelsea Boys* (New York: Alyson Books, 2003); Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth, *Chelsea Boys: Steppin' Out* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2006).
[463] Patrick Fillion's Class Comics products can be seen at www.classcomics.com. The collections published by German publisher Bruno Gmünder include for example Patrick Fillion, ed., *Heroes with Hardons: The Big Book of Class Comics* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2011).
[464] Matt Fagan, *Love* no. 1-3 (Chicago, IL: Self-published, 2002-2006).
[465] Rio Safari, *Homobody* no. 1-6 (Portland, OR: Move! Dance! Create!, 2007-2010).

Matt Runkle's *Runx Tales*,[466] and Ed Luce's *Wuvable Oaf*.[467] A wider range of comics that played with the conventions of the gay porno genre also appeared throughout the 2000s, including BiL Sherman's *Wanky Comics*,[468] Steve MacIsaac's *Shirtlifter*,[469] Brad Rader's *Harry and Dickless Tom*,[470] and Justin Hall and Dave Davenport's anthology *Hard to Swallow*.[471] Second Wave cartoonist Jon Macy, who had been inactive for many years, also published new erotic work: the graphic novel *Teleny and Camille*,[472] and the ongoing series *Fearful Hunter*.[473]

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a detailed and nuanced history of the field of LGBT comics. Following a lengthy "pre-Stonewall" period stretching from the late 1890s to the 1960s, LGBT comics production can be seen to coalesce as a field in its own right in the mid-to-late 1960s. From the 1970s to the present day, the history of the field can be organized in terms of three successive "waves" of activity. The First Wave is roughly analogous to the 1970s and 1980s, while the two subsequent Waves are tied to the 1990s and 2000s respectively. as I have shown, each of these waves of LGBT cartooning emerged within specific cultural, historical, political and theoretical contexts, which shaped the kinds of LGBT identities constructed within these comics. Political movements such as Gay Liberation and Lesbian feminism, and the queer cultural turn – as well as important historical events such as the Stonewall riots, the AIDS crisis, and the formation of commercialized gay urban enclaves or "gay villages" - have all had an impact on the kinds of stories being told in comics. They have also had an impact on the kinds of venues available for the publication of LGBT comics – so

[466] Matt Runkle, *Runx Tales* no. 1-3 (Iowa, IA: Self-published, 2008-2012).
[467] Ed Luce, *Wuvable Oaf* no. 0-4 (San Francisco, CA: Göteblud Press, 2008-2014).
[468] BiL Sherman, *Wanky Comics* no. 1-4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fear for the Folk, 2002-2003).
[469] Steve MacIsaac, *Shirtlifter* no. 1-4 (Los Angeles, CA: 2006-2011).
[470] Brad Rader, *Harry and Dickless Tom* (Los Angeles, CA: Flaming Artist Press, 2006).
[471] Justin Hall and Dave Davenport, eds., *Hard To Swallow* no. 1-4 (San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA: Marginalized Publications/All Thumbs Press, 2006-2008).
[472] Jon Macy, *Teleny and Camille* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2010).
[473] Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter* no. 1-4 (San Francisco, CA: Jon Macy, 2010-2014). Collected as Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2014).

for example, some of the earliest gay comic strips such as *Harry Chess* were published in the emerging gay press that was tied so strongly to Gay Liberation, while the comics more strongly associated with the oppositional queer subcultures were often self-published in zines which took up a punky, cut-and-paste aesthetic. This chapter has been concerned, in particular, the way in which gay male identity was discursively constructed in these comics. As I have discussed, gay identity in these comics has been tied to the dominant genres of gay porno and gay ghetto comics. In the next chapter, I will map the characteristics and conventions of the these two dominant genres, and how they relate to the dominant gay habitus and the field of gay male culture.

Chapter Four: The Conventions of Gay Porno and Gay Ghetto Comics

In this chapter, I will discuss the two dominant genres within the field of gay male comics – the gay porno and gay ghetto genres. I argue that these two genres are shaped by – and in turn, contribute to shaping – the dominant set of tastes, practices, predispositions, and identities of the field of gay male cultural practice. I call these dominant gay tastes, identities and practices the "dominant gay habitus,"[474] drawing on the work of Katherine Sender, who in turn draws on and extends Pierre Bourdieu's work on class identity to think about the ways in which sexual identities too are intimately connected to social practices and tastes. I will argue, with Sender, that there is a dominant gay habitus offered and shaped by dominant forms of media created by and aimed at gay men, including the gay porno and gay ghetto comics. I will discuss the gay porno and gay ghetto genres in turn, and show how their characteristics and conventions relate to the dominant cultural identities and practices of what is often called "mainstream gay culture," or the dominant gay habitus.

It is clear from the handful of articles on gay comics history that exist, that pornographic narratives, as well as narratives set in gay and lesbian communities, have been important within the field of gay comics. Jennequin, for example, gestures towards this by subtitling sections of his history of gay male American comics "above the belt" and "below," and noting the continued importance of pornography, as well as the emergence of what he calls the "gay sitcom" genre – what I have more or less named "gay ghetto comics."[475] However, the codes and conventions of gay porno and gay ghetto comics have not really been explored; therefore, this chapter seeks to fill this gap in scholarship.

It is important to explore the conventions of gay ghetto and gay porno comics for two reasons: firstly, because these genres have played such an important role in the history of gay male comics, virtually defining the field

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[474] Sender, *Business*, 14.
[475] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 40-42.

since the 1960s; and secondly, because the alternative queer male comics that emerged as part of the Second Wave of LGBT comics in the 1990s, positioned themselves in relation to these genres, using, adapting, questioning, and even in some cases abandoning their conventions.

The Dominant Gay Habitus

In this section I will explore the notion of the "dominant gay habitus" – this habitus is shaped by consumption and media representations, including the gay ghetto and gay comics this chapter focuses on. I argue that certain kinds of gay male bodies, as well as tastes and practices, are represented as valuable and typical – such representations constitute the most visible, dominant discourses of gay identity, playing an important role in defining what counts as authentic symbolic capital within the field of gay male culture, and shaping the dominant gay habitus. Other kinds of gay or queer bodies, identities, practices and tastes tend to be overshadowed or ignored in the gay ghetto and gay porno comics; the alternative queer comics that emerge in the 1990s, then, often seek to mock or undermine the dominant gay habitus, and posit or represent other possibilities.

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu's writings on the "habitus,"[476] Katherine Sender suggests there is a "gay male habitus" shaped by consumption and media representations. Drawing on Foucault, Sender argues that the role of institutions such as law, medicine, religion and education in discursively shaping how sexual identity has, since the early twentieth century, been displaced (albeit unevenly) by institutions of consumption – advertising, marketing, public relations and commercial media.[477]

As Sender describes, the notion of a "gay market" emerged in the 1990s. The decade saw the rise of the production, distribution and consumption of a variety of commodities aimed at gay and lesbian people as a new consumer niche in the US and the UK. Sender argues that the "gay market" is a "fictive

[476] See especially Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
[477] Sender, *Business*, 142-143.

entity" but an important one because of the cultural visibility it grants some LGBT people.[478] However, she points out that "as the fiction of the gay market and the fiction of gay identity become ever more entwined, what it means to be gay becomes increasingly articulated through what it means to be a gay consumer."[479] Critics of the gay market have also voiced concern over the way that gay marketing misrepresents the diversity of LGBT communities. As Sender explains, the affluent stereotypes of gays and lesbians generated by representative research methods are combined with the relatively conservative routines of advertising to produce images of only the most "desirable" members of the market.[480] As economists Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed argue, this means that "the real contours of the multicultural, class-stratified gay populations" are obscured, "while images of white, upper-middle-class lesbians and gay men become increasingly conspicuous."[481] Alexandra Chasin also argues that gay identity politics, in conjunction with gay identity-based consumption, "tends to underrepresent women, people of color, poor people, sick people, and very young and very old people."[482] The movement as it stands thus "fails to serve all our interests."[483]

Indeed, a number of gay male writers have voiced similar concerns – Tim Edwards, for example, arguing that contemporary gay culture "fails to meet the needs of even privileged white gay men themselves."[484] In 1996, gay journalist Mark Simpson edited a collection of essays by (mostly) gay journalists titled *Anti-Gay*.[485] In it, Simpson – a white gay man himself – attacked gay culture for its uniformity. Toby Manning critiqued gay culture's consumerism for promoting a conformist and inauthentic gay identity based on the consumption of "dance music, female comediennes, muscular bodies, designer clothes, Calvin

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[478] Ibid., 144.
[479] Ibid.
[480] Ibid., 7-8.
[481] Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, "The Gay Marketing Moment: Leaving Diversity in the Dust," *Dollars and Sense*, (November/December 1993), 17.
[482] Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Lesbian and Gay Movement Goes to Market* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 27.
[483] Ibid.
[484] Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 84.
[485] Mark Simpson, ed., *Anti-Gay* (London and New York: Cassell, 1996).

Klein underwear, cappuccino, bottled beers and Ikea furniture."[486] This mainstream gay identity, disseminated by the gay media as "official" gay culture, is comprised of nothing more than what is marketed to the pink pound by both gay and straight, mainstream business.

Alan Sinfield argues that Simpson's and Manning's critiques misrepresent gay culture as monolithic and mindless; he correctly points out that there is no *singular*, monolithic gay culture.[487] Because of differences of gender, race, class, generation and more, the tastes and practices of LGBT people are segmented into a number of discrete and overlapping clusters. Yet as Katherine Sender emphasizes, "each of these clusters does not have equivalent opportunity to appear as – and speak for – the gay community."[488] As Mark Fenster reiterates, the construction of a gay and lesbian community making demands for rights does indeed posit a series of "dominant gay and lesbian identities and cultural practices"[489] – what Katherine Sender describes as a "dominant gay habitus."

Bourdieu's concept of the "habitus" describes "how tastes shape the relationship between the body and its symbolic and material contexts."[490] Habitus is Bourdieu's term for structures, rules and dispositions as they are embodied in human beings; the internalisation of external structures, or as Bourdieu puts it, "a socialized subjectivity"[491] and "the social embodied."[492] Bourdieu defines the habitus as a property of social agents (whether individuals, groups, or institutions) and as "a "structured and structuring structure."[493] The habitus is a system of dispositions, or sets of thoughts and actions, that are 'structuring" in that they help to shape an individual's past and future practices. It is "structured" by the objective conditions of their existence, such as family upbringing and education. Bourdieu particularly focuses on

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[486] Toby Manning, "Gay Culture: Who Needs It?" in *Anti-Gay*, ed. Simpson, 107.
[487] Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 15
[488] Sender, *Business,* 15.
[489] Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines," 76-77.
[490] Sender, *Business*, 14.
[491] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 127.
[492] Ibid., 128.
[493] Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words; Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. M. Adamson (1987; Cambridge: Polity, 1994)

education, occupation, and gender "as dominant variables in the formation of habitus," notes Sender, but argues that "lived environments also include practices and sensibilities that are organized around other forms of identification, including sexuality"[494] and hence points to participation in LGBT cultural life – and "gay-specific cultural capital"[495] – as playing an important part in the formation of the gay or lesbian habitus.

These structures are internalised at the level of the body and expressed through its practices. As McNay describes, "the concept of habitus does not denote just the process in which the norms are inculcated upon the body, but also the moment of praxis or living through of these norms by the individual."[496] Sender explains that "Habitus embodies the lived conditions within which social practices, hierarchies, and forms of identification are manifested through an individual's choices, but signals that those choices are already predisposed by an existing social position."[497] As Richard Jenkins puts it, the central theme of Bourdieu's work "is the attempt to understand the relationship between 'subjectivity' – individual social being as it is experienced and lived, from the personal inside out so to speak and the 'objective' social world within which it is framed and towards the production and reproduction of which it contributes."[498] Bourdieu is concerned with the reproduction of society through its structures, but also attempts to understand how these structures are inhabited by social agents; he attempts to do this by combining his notion of the habitus with that of the field (discussed in the Introduction to this thesis).

Any habitus is shaped by, and operates within, a given field; the dominant gay habitus described by Sender is shaped by and operates within the broad field of gay cultural practice, which includes the field of gay media production and also the gay social scene. Habitus and field are inseparable terms that depend upon each other for existence. The field is comprised of the agents operating within its boundaries. It only exists because its members

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[494] Sender, *Business*, 14.
[495] Ibid., 15.
[496] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 36.
[497] Sender, *Business,* 14.
[498] Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Revised edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 25.

possess the dispositions and actions that enact its structures, and so "the habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world."[499]

By the same token, in order to participate in the field, agents incorporate its structures into their habitus: "For a field to work, there must be stakes, and people ready to play the game, equipped with the habitus which enables them to know and to recognise the immanent laws of the game."[500] The habitus and the field are mutually constitutive effects that together work to reproduce social structures, so that "when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world around itself for granted."[501]

The identities, tastes and practices associated with a dominant gay habitus are displayed "in bars, music clubs, parties or on the street,"[502] the social institutions and events of the broad field of gay cultural practice. They are represented in cultural products such as magazines, advertisements, films – and comics. Dominant positions within gay communities tend to be held by middle class adult homosexuals who possess higher levels of economic capital, and are thereby better equipped "to represent themselves and circulate those representations"[503] through various forms of commercial media. Katherine Sender also argues that such representations tend to focus on gay men and lesbians who are "privileged by status (they are white, affluent, young) or by behaviour (they sexually discreet and politically acquiescent)."[504] These narrow representations, then, constitute the most visible, dominant discourses of gay identity, playing an important role in defining what counts as authentic symbolic capital within the field of gay culture, and shaping the dominant gay habitus. By contrast, people of colour, poorer people, older people, activists, sex radicals, transgender people, and others who don't fit with this image "languish in obscurity."[505]

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[499] Pierre Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 127.
[500] Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage, 1993), 72.
[501] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 127.
[502] Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines," 76-77.
[503] Ibid.
[504] Sender, *Business*, 97.
[505] Ibid.

Sender makes many important observations about the way in which magazines that seek corporate sponsorship, like *The Advocate*, represent the LGBT community. However, the sexual values of the gay male collectivity, and what constitutes a dominant gay male *sexual* habitus is a much more complex question than Sender's portrayal of the dominant gay habitus as "sexually discreet"[506] allows. As Tim Edwards points out, many gay men complain that gay culture is "a shallow, youth-dominated, image-, sex- and body-obsessed world predicated on self-loathing,"[507] and within the field of gay *male* cultural practice, the dominant habitus is one associated with a high level of what we might term "sexual capital."

Forms of sexual capital that operate within the gay male cultural field include a body that is attractive in accordance to dominant gay body ideals, and various social researchers and commentators have identified a gay body image ideal, as well as a social hierarchy on the basis of that ideal, in diverse gay social contexts.[508] As Sarah Grogan describes, gay male culture "places an elevated importance on the appearance of the body"[509] and "evidence suggests that gay men are less satisfied with their bodies than heterosexual men, in parallel with increased pressure from the gay community to be slender and muscular."[510] Gabriel Rotello writes of the "powerful, even merciless system of rewards and

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[506] Ibid.
[507] Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, 84.
[508] See for example Tony Ayres, "Sexual Identity and Cultural identity: A Crash Course" in *Diaspora: Negotiating Asian Australia: Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 65, 2000, 367-372; Tim Bergling, *Chasing Adonis: Gay Men and the Pursuit of Perfection* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Keith Berry, "Embracing the Catastrophe: Gay Body Seeks Acceptance," *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2007), 259-281; Murray J.N. Drummond, "Men's Bodies: Listening to the Voices of Young Gay Men," *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2005), 270-290; Murray J.N. Drummond and Shaun M. Filiault, "The Hegemonic Aesthetic," *Gay and Lesbian Issues in Psychology Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2007), 175-184; Travis Kong Shiu-Ki, "Queer At Your Own Risk: Marginality, Community, and Hong Kong Gay Male Bodies," *Sexualities*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2004), 5-20; Russell Westhaver, "Flaunting and Empowerment: Thinking about Circuit Parties, The Body, and Power," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 35, no. 6 (2006), 611-644; Mitchell J. Wood, "The Gay Male Gaze: Body Image Disturbance and Gender Oppression Among Gay Men," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2004), 43-62.
[509] Sarah Grogan, *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2008), 180.
[510] Ibid., 182.

penalties based on body image"[511] in gay male culture. Gay men who refuse to embody the status-markers of the athletic, Caucasian body ideal – or who simply cannot, due to age, skin colour, disability, or class status – find their engagement with gay social life curtailed.[512]

The centrality of this kind of sexual capital to the dominant habitus of the field of gay male cultural and social practice is reflected – in comics – in the kinds of male bodies that are represented as desirable and valuable. It is also, as I have noted, part of a broader regime of representation of desirable male bodies that is found across a range of different forms of gay male media. These forms of media, including comics, in turn play a role in shaping what counts as legitimate sexual capital in the context of the field of gay male culture, and shaping the aesthetic and sexual tastes associated with the dominant gay habitus.

Michelangelo Signorile describes the emphasis on the lean, athletic and muscular body ideal on the gay male scene as "body fascism"; any man who cannot meet "a rigid set of standards of physical beauty" is "deemed physically unattractive and sexually undesirable."[513] Furthermore, "in a culture in which the physical body is held in such high esteem," body fascism then "not only deems those who don't or can't conform to be sexually less desirable, but in the extreme . . . also deems an individual completely worthless *as a person*, based solely on his exterior."[514] Signorile sees body fascism as an outcome of what he describes as a "cult of masculinity" underpinning contemporary gay male club culture, and particularly "the circuit," a series of large gay dance parties that occur throughout the year in cities around the USA and the world, attended by tens of thousands of gay men. The values and behaviour of the circuit and the "cult of masculinity" influence a much broader segment of gay men than actually participate in the weekend parties, setting the standard for many gay

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[511] Gabriel Rotello, *Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men* (New York: Plume Books, 1998), 254. See also Duane Duncan, "Embodying the Gay Self: Body Image, Reflexivity and Embodied Identity," *Health Sociology Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2010), 438.
[512] Duncan, "Embodying the Gay Self," 438.
[513] Michelangelo Signorile, *Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 28.
[514] Ibid.

men "on how to be gay – both in looks as well as in lifestyles and activities."[515] These standards and stereotypes of "how to be gay" are both reflected in, and shaped by, the gay media produced from within the field of gay male cultural practice, including the gay ghetto and gay porno comics this chapter is concerned with.

Signorile sees the origins of the "cult of masculinity" in the clone culture of the 1970s, with its valorisation of cruising and having sex with many different partners; the ability to cruise successfully and have sex with a variety of – again, usually conventionally attractive partners – can be seen as another form of "sexual capital." Beginning in the 1970s, gay liberationist writers like John Allen Lee in his 1978 book *Getting Sex: A New Approach*[516] argued that gay male promiscuity should be celebrated. Autobiographical works by John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw*[517] and Edmund White's *States of Desire*,[518] as well as several studies of gay male sexual behaviour,[519] emphasized both the secrecy and the sophistication of men's sexual behaviour with other men in public and semi-public places. Tim Edwards writes that such studies reinforced stereotypes of men's innate promiscuity, but also suggested that "the clone not only donned a masculine appearance but practised a stereotypically masculine sexuality that was divorced from emotional commitment and intimacy."[520] Signorile argues that discourses circulating in the gay sexual subcultures of the 1970s constructed gay sexual practices as *necessarily* and *always* being "liberating, . . . important cultural, social, and political acts," and quotes Edmund White's contention that "with the collapse of other social values . . . sex has been forced to become our sole mode of transcendence and our only touchstone of authenticity."[521]

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[515] Ibid., xxv.
[516] John Allen Lee, *Getting Sex: A New Approach – More Fun, Less Guilt* (Ontario: Mission Book Company, 1978).
[517] John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977).
[518] Edmund White, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (London: Picador, 1986).
[519] Such as Edward W. Delph, *The Silent Community: Public Sexual Encounters* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978); Karla Jay and Allen Young, *The Gay Report* (New York: Summit Books, 1979); and James Spada, *The Spada Report* (New York: Signet, 1979).
[520] Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, 87.
[521] Signorile, *Life Outside*, 60.

In *Queer Wars*, Paul Robinson criticizes Signorile, accusing him as well as other writers such as Rotello of "denigrating sex."[522] However, he misses the point that Signorile seeks to make about the way that Gay Liberationist discourses on sex, in attempting to reverse the understanding of gay sex as sick and sinful in the homophobic "straight world," ultimately created a demand for a rigid and conformist understanding of gay male sex and promiscuity as inherently positive, political and "good."

In the aftermath of AIDS, debates between "sex positive" and so-called "sex negative" gay writers grew ever more polarized and virulent, hence Thomas Piontek's characterization of these debates as "the gay male sex wars."[523] As Piontek argues, "both positions assume the mistaken notion that a social practice such as sex (which in and of itself is neither moral nor immoral) could be endowed with supposedly essential moral qualities."[524] He goes on to note that "each side is also quite vehement in its demand for 'positive representations' of the gay community, either as happily promiscuous or blissfully monogamous"; such demands for gay writing and representation more broadly are programmatic and prescriptive, suggesting that the function of gay cultural production "should be restricted to promoting a party line."[525] Questions of sex, monogamy and promiscuity, body fascism and sexual confidence, are all central to the representations of gay male bodies, sex, and relationships portrayed in the First Wave gay porno and the gay ghetto comics, and remain central in the Second Wave alternative queer comics that both adapt and question the conventions and stereotypes of these dominant genres.

I argue that the gay porno and the gay ghetto comics contribute to the construction of a dominant gay habitus that is both sexual and social, employing representational regimes that create a visible and "typical" gayness. In doing so, these strips naturalize and reify certain culturally and historically specific gay scenes, lifestyles, and mores as exemplary of "what the gay community is *really*

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[522] Paul Robinson, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 119.
[523] Thomas Piontek, "Queering the Rhetoric of the Gay male Sex Wars" in his *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 30-51.
[524] Ibid., 37-38.
[525] Ibid., 37.

like." Therefore, they present an image of the gay community and gay identity as relatively unified and stable. While they sometimes do question aspects of gay male culture, the majority of gay ghetto and gay porno comics tend not to be critical, representing an idealized version of the gay male body as typical, valuable and desirable, while often marginalizing or devaluing gay male bodies and identities that fail to conform to this ideal.

In the following chapters, I will discuss the different ways in which the queer alternative comics of the 1990s took up many of the conventions of these genres, but treated them in different ways, working with and against genre conventions in order to present a critique of gay male cultural norms and stereotypes. In the remainder of this chapter, I intend to discuss the characteristics and conventions of the gay porno and gay ghetto genres. In his 1975 article "Genre and Movies" Douglas Pye contends that "the outlines of any genre . . . remain indistinct" and ultimately "impossible to chart" definitively. Instead, he recommends "that genre criticism should concern itself with identifying tendencies within generic traditions and placing individual works in relation to these."[526] What follows, then, is not intended as absolutely definitive, but rather as an attempt to chart the generic tendencies of gay porno and gay ghetto comics.

Gay Porno Comics – Genre Conventions

In this section, I will discuss the generic tendencies of gay porno comics produced in the pre-Stonewall and First Waves of American gay male comics production. I will discuss the character types, scenarios, and drawing styles that are commonly found in these gay porno comics; with reference to John Mercer's work on gay pornographic video, I will discuss a number of discourses that gay porno comics as well as videos commonly draw upon. I argue that the gay porno comics represent both gay sex and gay male bodies in an idealized way: gay sex is nearly always a positive and pleasurable experience in these comics, and male bodies tend to be slim, youthful, athletic and muscular. These comics

[526] Douglas Pye, "Genre and Movies", *Movie*, no. 20 (1975), 29.

usually feature "flat" characters that tend to be happy and horny, but rarely display a more rounded range of emotions. These comics construct an *ideal* "type" of gay male identity and sexual habitus, valorising the ideals and mores associated with gay male culture where idealized, youthful and athletic gay male bodies are highly prized, and sex with a variety of partners is celebrated and seen as central to gay male identity.

"Gay porno" cartoons and strips have been published in gay magazines since the 1960s, as well as collected in anthologies. Key examples include the *Meatmen* erotic comics anthology, twenty-six volumes of which were published by Winston Leyland between 1986 and 2004. More recently, they have also appeared in glossy hardback books published by Bruno Gmunder, such as *Heroes with Hard-Ons: The Big Book of Class Comics.*[527] In describing these comics as pornographic I adopt Dyer's working definition of porn as any work of art "that has as its aim sexual arousal in the spectator."[528] Gay pornographic comics are certainly intended above all else to be sexually arousing, and are usually "hardcore" in that they explicitly show erections and penetration. Notable cartoonists working in the genre include not only Tom of Finland, but also many others: "Sean" (John Klamik, whose non-pornographic, satirical cartoons appeared in the gay press under the alternative pseudonym "Shawn"); "Stephen" (Dom Orejudos, also known as "Etienne"); "Julius"; "Joe"; "Osze"; "Mike" (Michael Kuchar); "Zack"; Brad Parker; The Hun; John Blackburn; and more recently artists like Logan and Patrick Fillion.

In some of the gay porno comics and cartoons, a wholly different scenario and set of characters is presented in each instalment, while in others the focus is on a regular set of characters. Discussing the art of Tom of Finland, Micha Ramakers describes his male figures as "interchangeable" and "virtually identical: same hair, same nose, same mouth, and same chin. Furthermore, they have the same body and the same penis."[529] Individual differentiation is

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[527] Patrick Fillion, ed., *Heroes with Hardons: The Big Book of Class Comics*, Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2011.
[528] Richard Dyer, "Coming to Terms," in his *Only Entertainment*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2000), 138.
[529] Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures*, 55.

minimal; Tom's men are "prototypes" – his work is concerned not with the representation of individual gay men, but with gay men as a group. It is "a running commentary on evolutions within (a particular) gay subculture."[530]

Tom's work has been a model for others. In the majority of gay porno comics, cartoonists tend to depict very specific *types* of gay men. As discussed in Chapter Three, these repeated types constitute a regime of representation, with the characters depicted by cartoonists like Sean, Stephen, Joe, and others usually being white, muscular, conventionally masculine and handsome, square-jawed and well-hung. These characters are shown participating in sexual activities that often take place in physical spaces which have a masculine connotation. For example, as Tim Edwards describes when discussing gay male pornographic film, this might be "on construction sites, in . . . locker rooms, prisons and other places where male-to-male contact, male exclusivity or masculine association is often significant."[531]

As Dyer describes, pornography as "an art rooted in bodily effect," as well as giving us pleasure can also "give us a knowledge of the body that other art cannot."[532] For Dyer, porn usually gives us "bad knowledge" of the body, but he also argues that it can potentially "be a site for 're-educating desire' . . . in a way that constructs desire in the body, not merely theoretically in relation to, and often against, it."[533] As Dyer argues

> Porn (all porn) is . . . part of how we live our sexuality; how we represent sexuality to ourselves is part of how we live it, and porn has rather cornered the market on the representation of sexuality. . . . Porn involves us bodily in that education: criticism of porn should be opening up reflection on the education we are receiving in order to change it.[534]

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[530] Ibid., 57.
[531] Tim Edwards, *Erotics & Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity and Feminism*, London: Routledge, 1994, 84.
[532] Dyer, "Coming To Terms," 140.
[533] Ibid.
[534] Ibid., 148.

The characters in the majority of the gay porno comics are, in E.M. Forster's terms, "flat" characters – "types" with little personality beyond serving the needs of pornographic narratives. [535] In some cases, cartoonists focus on a single protagonist who appears in a series of different sexual scenarios in each episode of the strip: for example, Tom of Finland's Kake and The Hun's Big Sig. Even though such characters reappear they do not become much more "round" than those that appear only once. Within the majority of the gay porno comics these characters are focused on having sex and little more is done with their characterization. We know that such characters tend to be horny all the time, and that they are either tops, bottoms or versatile, but we discover little of their personalities beyond this, nor how the non-sexual aspects of their identities intertwine with their erotic desires.

The characters in gay porno comics can be seen as embodiments of gay liberationist discourses which sought to valorise liberated, promiscuous sex and a gay sexual culture that promotes what Edwards describes as "a stereotypically masculine sexuality . . . divorced from emotional commitment and intimacy."[536] These characters may represent an idealized version of a sexual culture which in the 1970s was perhaps a reality in the gay urban enclaves of cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York.[537] They also chime with discourses within contemporary gay male culture that represent men as "naturally" promiscuous, constantly horny, and de-emphasize the emotional aspects of gay men's identities – the "cult of masculinity" described by Signorile. As Edwards argues, in "asserting that gay men [can] be real men too," while divorcing homosexuality from its associations with effeminacy, such gay cultural discourses join gay men and hegemonic models of masculinity "together into a form of matrimony that [is] not altogether happy."[538]

Writing about the scenarios represented in gay pornographic videos, John Mercer argues that "gay porn is normative and concerned with

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[535] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; London: Penguin, 2005), 73-84.
[536] Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, 87.
[537] See Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) for a history of 1970s gay sexual culture. The period was also documented, as previously mentioned, by John Rechy in his *The Sexual Outlaw*.
[538] Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, 87.

repetition,"[539] with constructing "norms of sexual conduct, desire and power relations."[540] Gay porn presents a "fantasy of what the gay world should (or could) be like; who takes on what role in sexual encounters, what constitutes good or bad sex, and how the ideal gay man lives his life."[541] While Mercer focuses on gay video porn, this is equally true of gay porno and gay ghetto comics. Both genres generate discourses about what constitutes a "good" or "bad," "ideal" and even "authentic" gay identity and habitus. John Mercer identifies a range of normative discourses that operate in their narratives, "situat[ing] gay desire and construct[ing] the locus of a gay mythology."[542] He describes six broad discursive categories that can commonly be found in gay pornographic videos: The all-male environment, heterosexual scenarios, the urban gay lifestyle, the luxury fantasy, the idyll, and sadomasochism. Indeed, the majority of these scenarios can also be found in gay male pornographic comics.

The all-male environment is, "perhaps, the most recurrent discourse in operation in gay pornographic videos" and gay porno comics. It "posits scenarios where the restrictions of the heterosexual world no longer apply, where, in the absence of females as objects of sexual desire and release, men are compelled to use each other as substitutes, or where men's true sexual desires for each other can be articulated."[543] As Mercer describes, army barracks, prisons, and locker rooms are familiar settings, and soldiers, sailors, prison guards and inmates, and athletes are recurrent character types in commercial video porn. This is also true of commercial gay porno comics. In *Hard To Imagine*, his history of pre-Stonewall gay male eroticism, Thomas Waugh argues that such images of all-male environments and camaraderie "offer a dream of

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[539] John Mercer, "In the Slammer: The Myth of the Prison in American Gay Pornographic Video," in *Eclectic Views on Gay Male Pornography: Pornucopia*, ed. Todd G. Morrison (Binghampton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 154.
[540] Ibid., 155.
[541] Ibid.
[542] Ibid, 156.
[543] Ibid.

community," but not as part of a secret underground subculture. Rather, it is a dream "of belonging to the mainstream of homosocial normalcy."[544]

Examples of the all-male environment in gay porno comics are almost too numerous to mention. They include Sean's "Pledge Watchers," which takes place in a college fraternity house, and his "Swim Meat,"[545] (**Fig. 4-1**) which involves an all-male college swim team; Joe's "Hotshot Seamen: Cumin' on Board,"[546] (**Fig. 4-2**) set on a ship with an all-male crew; and Stephen's "Locker Room"[547] (**Fig. 4-3**), which is set in a college football locker room. The Hun's "Big Sig" series shows the eponymous muscular and naïve young blonde

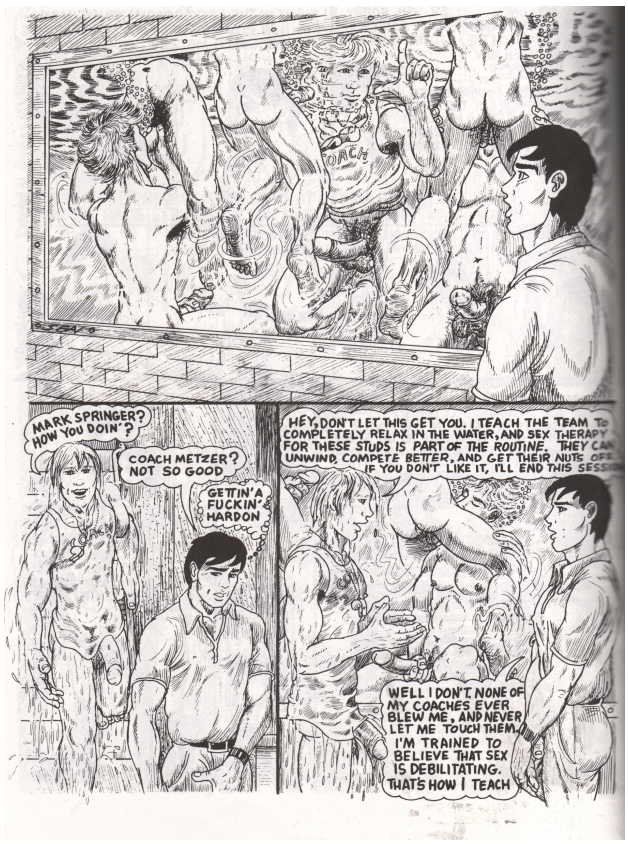

Fig. 4-1 – Sean, "Swim Meat." *Meatmen* Vol. 13, 94.

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[544] Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 228.
[545] Sean (John Klamik), "Swim Meat," *Meatmen* Vol. 13, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1992), 92-101.
[546] Joe, "Hotshot Seamen: Cumin' on Board," *Meatmen* Vol. 19, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1997), 7-21.
[547] Stephen (Dom Orejudos), "Locker Room," *Meatmen* Vol. 7, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1990), 27-43.

Fig. 4-2 – Joe's "Hotshot Seamen: Cumin' on Board." *Meatmen* Vol. 19, 10.

Fig. 4-3 – Stephen (Dom Orejudos), "Locker Room." Meatmen Vol. 7, 27.

sexually "abused" by the coach, warden, and other inmates at Shady Nook, a penitentiary for young offenders.[548] More recent examples of the all-male discourse in gay porno comics include Robert Fraser and Joseph Hawk's three-issue series *The Initiation: Higher Sex Education*, published by Class Comics, which is set in the "Zeta Mega Phallus" fraternity house.[549] Dale Lazarov and Alessio Slominsky's *Good Sports*, too, draws on this discourse, showing the domestic sex life of a gay couple who are shown, through flashbacks, to have first become involved in the showers, as members of the same football team.[550]

Mercer contends that while examples of the all-male environment in commercial gay pornography are near-ubiquitous, paradoxically, heterosexual scenarios are also a prominent feature in gay porn. Sometimes this discourse manifests itself in conjunction with that of the all-male environment, with "the red-blooded heterosexual man using the opportunity of gay sex as an outlet for his uncontrollable sexual urges," while at other times we see "the supposedly straight man being inducted into the joys of gay sex."[551]

This discourse can be seen as homophobic, because it seems to "celebrate and affirm hegemonic masculinity by eroticising the heterosexual male and his milieu."[552] In some examples the homophobic subtext is explicit, with gay-identified men being humiliated by men who identify as heterosexual and only take the active role in same-sex acts. However, there are also examples where heterosexual scenarios are "not necessarily homonegative."[553] Examples in scenes of gay men taking the active role and taking pleasure from straight men, or when "the straight man discovers, sometimes to his surprise, that gay sex is different from, and possibly better than, its heterosexual equivalent."[554]

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[548] The Hun's comics have been collected in several volumes of *Meatmen*; see for example The Hun, "Big Sig, " *Meatmen* Vol. 1, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: GS Press/Leyland Publications, 1986), 147-150.
[549] Robert Fraser and Joseph Hawk, *The Initiation: Higher Sex Education* no. 1-3 (Coquitlam, British Columbia: Class Comics, 2011-2013).
[550] Dale Lazarov and Alessio Slominsky, *Good Sports* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2012).
[551] Mercer, "In the Slammer," 157.
[552] Ibid.
[553] Ibid.
[554] Ibid., 158.

Examples of the heterosexual discourse from gay porno comics include Stephen's "Here Comes the Groom,"[555] in which a handsome professional hockey star drinks a glass of champagne spiked with an aphrodisiac on his wedding night. He is used sexually by a series of men including two sailors and a lifeguard, while his new bride is getting ready in the next room. Realizing he prefers having sex with men, at the story's end he is dreaming of the sexual encounters he plans to have with other sportsmen on his team. In Farraday's humorous erotic story "The Adventures of Stud Rollover,"[556] the eponymous gay hero seduces and converts a hunky, homophobic, and heterosexual construction worker while selling him power tools at the construction site. In a more recent example, from Butch McLogic's *Tug Harder*,[557] a gay undercover photojournalist seduces his way through a farmyard of dangerous, ostensibly heterosexual men, including ex-convicts.

The next two categories Mercer identifies can be seen as representations validating an autonomous gay lifestyle, albeit a highly idealised one: the urban gay lifestyle discourse, and the luxury fantasy discourse. The first is marked by a celebration of the contemporary urban gay lifestyle, albeit a very particular one, "situated in the West Coast of America" and revolving around "youth, physical beauty, sexual availability and promiscuity."[558] The gay lifestyle depicted is "synonymous with an idealisation of the lives of urban, affluent, Californian, white gay men" who are "always young, always good-looking, always muscular and, of course, always horny."[559]

Among the scenarios regularly identified within the urban gay lifestyle discourse are bar and club culture, street life, the gay porn industry, prostitution, and luxuriously appointed domestic arrangements. The luxury fantasy discourse is often deployed in conjunction with the urban gay lifestyle discourse, "deploying a mise-en-scene imbued with either pseudo-classical

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[555] Stephen (Dom Orejudos), "Here Comes the Groom," *Meatmen* Vol. 2, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1987), 7-26.
[556] Farraday, "The Adventures of Stud Rollover," *Meatmen* Vol. 10, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1991), 63-80.
[557] Butch McLogic, *Tug Harder* no. 1-3 (Coquitlam, British Columbia: Class Comics, 2011-2012).
[558] Ibid.
[559] Ibid.

conceits or, more often, the signifiers of a wealthy and indolent California lifestyle"[560] complete with glamorous locations, swimming pools, beaches, tennis courts, ski lodges and Jacuzzis. In gay porno comics, we find the urban gay lifestyle operating, for example, in Chuck's "Alex," which follows the title character's sexually explicit adventures in gay bathhouses, sex clubs and cruising areas;[561] Zack's "Slaves to Lust" and its hero Kyle Jansen, a young rent boy;[562] Brad Parker's "Bedwyr," set in a Venice Beach bath house;[563] and the young rent-boy heroes of Mioki's *Side by Side*.[564] The urban gay lifestyle discourse also pervades the gay ghetto comics genre, which I will discuss below. Billy from Jerry Mills' *Poppers*, Sky from Hanson and Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys*, and many characters in other gay ghetto comics embody this urban gay lifestyle discourse, sometimes in conjunction with the luxury fantasy.

The final two categories operate in what Mercer describes as "a more fantastic or metaphysical arena of sexual discourse."[565] Both are often characterised by less emphasis on narrative and more emphasis on elaborately stylised or codified mise-en-scene. These are the discourse of the idyll and the discourse of sadomasochism. The discourse of the idyll "is articulated around 'back to nature' scenarios where nudity and exposure to the elements arouse the gay man's 'natural' sexual instincts."[566] Examples from comics are relatively rare but include Sean's story "Bigfoot and a Half," about lumberjacks having sex with one another and with the legendary Bigfoot in the forests and mountains of the Northwest.[567]

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[560] Ibid., 160.
[561] Chuck, "Alex," *Meatmen* Vol. 2, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1987), 158-163.
[562] Zack, "Slaves to Lust," *Meatmen* Vol. 24, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 2000), 7-36.
[563] Brad Parker, "Bedwyr," *Meatmen* Vol. 7, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1990), 77-81.
[564] Mioki, *Side by Side* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2008).
[565] Ibid.
[566] Ibid., 161.
[567] Sean (John Klamik), "Bigfoot and a Half," *Meatmen* Vol. 7, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1990), 95-111.

The discourse of sadomasochistic (SM) fantasy, as Mercer describes, "is invoked in conjunction with almost all the other discursive categories"[568] he identifies. The SM discourse's "principle characteristics are the use of dungeon settings, the overdetermined iconography of the leatherman and the fetishization of anonymous and/or group sexual encounters,"[569] and, often, more extreme sexual practices such as fisting. Examples from gay porno comics are too numerous to catalogue. Every edition of *Meatmen* featured at least one story that invoked the SM discourse, and volumes eighteen, twenty-four and twenty-six were wholly SM-themed. Sean, Stephen, The Hun, Mike Kuchar and more have all done SM-themed stories. The various titles published by Patrick Fillion's Class Comics also often feature elements of the SM discourse, most obviously exemplified by the leather-clad sex-demon *Deimos* in Fillion's comics series of the same name.[570]

In terms of Mercer's six discourses alone, the gay porn genre in video and comics seem similar, but there are differences. The moving, photographic image of video is distinct from the static, graphic images in comics. Discussing pre-Stonewall gay graphics, the precursor to the contemporary gay porno comics genre, Thomas Waugh argues that the primary operation of a photographed or filmed image is "indexical or documentary," "intended to arouse through this evidence of 'real' bodies, 'real' organs, 'real' historical subjects" engaged in "real" sexual acts.[571] In contrast, drawings "offer a richer spectrum of fantasy . . . often in inverse proportion to their importance as documentary evidence."[572] Comics are more frequently set in fantastical, otherworldly, or futuristic settings. *Meatmen* devoted volumes twelve and fifteen to sci-fi themes, for example.

The possibilities offered by drawing rather than photography also mean that gay porno comics can depict ever more idealized body types, and represent ejaculation in an exaggerated manner. Richard Dyer has argued that the

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[568] Ibid.
[569] Ibid.
[570] Patrick Fillion, *Deimos* no. 0-2 (Coquitlam, British Columbia: Class Comics, 2011-2014).
[571] Thomas Waugh, *Out/Lines*, 20.

[572] Ibid.

narratives of gay porn film are "organized around the desire to ejaculate,"[573] and Thomas Waugh writes that "Ejaculation is definitely a privileged visual and narrative element"[574] in many of the pre-Stonewall graphics he discusses. In the post-Stonewall comics I discuss here, this is no less the case: the majority of stories end with the protagonists drenched in exaggerated floods of ejaculate.

The majority of gay porno cartoonists tend to draw in a style that could be described as relatively "realistic." However, Micha Ramakers, discussing Tom of Finland's work, draws attention to the problems of terms such as "realistic." He describes Tom's work as "part hyperrealist and part caricatural." On one hand, the level of detail of men's faces and musculature "suggest[s] a more focused and sharper representation of 'reality' than that achieved by any photograph," whilst on the other, "the systematic exaggeration of certain physical features . . . means that the term cannot be easily applied to the work without losing some of its meaning."[575] Ramakers also notes that the high level of detail and "the sensualist finish" of Tom's work resulted in drawings that were not strictly speaking realistic, "but rather idealizing representations (sometimes bordering on caricature) of the sexual world."[576] With reference to Scott McCloud's "Big Triangle of Style," introduced in his influential study *Understanding Comics* and discussed in Chapter Two, we could place the work of artists such as Tom of Finland, as well as Sean, Stephen, Joe, and others, along the left side of the Triangle's x-axis – that is, where McCloud places other, more mainstream cartoonists renowned for the relative "realism" of their work, such as Hal Foster (who worked on a *Tarzan* strip), and Silver and Bronze Age superhero artists like Neal Adams, John Buscema, and John Byrne.

Josef Witek classifies such artists as working in "the naturalistic mode."[577] He identifies the naturalistic as one of the two dominant modes he describes as "the unexamined givens of the profession of making comics" for

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[573] Richard Dyer, "Coming To Terms." 145.
[574] Waugh, *Out/Lines,* 34.
[575] Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures*, 33-35.
[576] Ibid., 35-37.
[577] Josef Witek, "Comics Modes," in *Critical Approaches to Comics*, eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, New York: Routledge, 2012, 31.

over half a century; the other is the "the cartoon mode."[578] As Witek writes, the naturalistic visual style of comics "derives from the conventions of realism in the visual arts and particularly in photography,"[579] and in the naturalistic mode

> . . . the rendering of figures and objects adheres to (or at least points toward) the artistic conventions for creating the illusion of physical forms existing in three-dimensional space. A significant effort is made to create that plausible physical world using shading, consistent lighting sources, texture, and linear perspective.[580]

As Witek writes, the naturalistic mode of comics "has long been the preferred approach for stories of adventure"[581] in mainstream comic books, in particular superheroic adventure. In contrast, what Witek describes as the "cartoon mode" – which "grows out of caricature, with its basic principles of simplification and exaggeration" – has most closely associated "humour . . . in comic strips and in gag cartoons (what is sometimes called 'big-foot cartooning')."[582] I argue that the naturalistic mode has also long been the preferred approach for pornographic stories in gay male comics, while the cartoon mode is much more associated with the often more gently humorous gay ghetto genre. This is not to say that there are *no* examples of gay porno comics that could be placed along the right side of the Triangle of Style's x-axis, becoming less "realistic" and more "cartoony": The erotic work of The Hun and Mike Kuchar could certainly be described in this way. However, I contend that the style of the majority of American gay porno comics tends toward what Witek calls the naturalistic mode, whereas the gay ghetto comics tend to be somewhat more diverse as well as tending toward Witek's cartoon mode. The claims I make here of course must be taken to refer to what is generally most usual, and, as Witek notes, the naturalistic and cartoon modes of comics "are by

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[578] Ibid., 34.
[579] Ibid., 32.
[580] Ibid., 31.
[581] Ibid., 28.
[582] Ibid.

no means mutually exclusive," and "comics combining elements of both modes are extremely common."[583] It must also be remembered, too, how culturally specific these generalizations are – if we were to look at pornographic depictions of sex between men in Japanese *manga*, for example, we would find many drawn in a style that could be described as tending towards a "cartoony" mode than a naturalistic one.

In *The Visual Language of Comics*, Neil Cohn categorizes the particular kind of "naturalistic" visual style associated with superhero comics as the "Kirbyan dialect" – one of a number of varying styles all found within American comic books and strips.[584] The name "Kirbyan" is derived from "the historical influence of [comic book artist/writer] Jack "King" Kirby in defining this style," though as Cohn notes, other significant influences on this style include Steve Ditko, Neal Adams, John Byrne and many others.[585] In the "'Standard' dialect" of Kirbyan American Visual Language (AVL), Cohn notes, bodies – while in some sense drawn naturalistically – are often physically exaggerated or idealized: "men are more muscular, women are more curvy. Stereotypically, all figures look like athletes or models."[586] The conventionalized male face in Kirbyan AVL tends to have "an angular jaw, pronounced cheekbones, and distinct eyebrow muscles."[587] Very similar observations could be made about the kinds of muscular, athletic male bodies most often seen in gay porno comics.

The similarity of the dominant, "naturalistic" – if idealized – styles of mainstream superhero comics to the dominant, idealized "naturalism" of gay porno comics does not seem to be coincidental. One gay erotic illustrator, Felix Lance Falkon, who was active before and after Stonewall, explicitly discusses the relationship between gay erotic illustration and superhero comics in his book *Gay Art*. He associates the interest in the muscular physique in homoerotic art with

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[583] Ibid.
[584] Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
[585] Ibid.
[586] Ibid., 140-141.
[587] Ibid., 141.

> . . . the proliferation of comic book superheroes – Superman and his myriad of descendants – in costumes that usually revealed every line of their musculature . . . Regardless of the intent of the [superhero comic book] artists, however, the comic-book heroes do much to establish clean-cut musculature as a virility symbol among adolescent boys, and even more important, to establish that symbol in pictorial form – as a *drawing*.[588]

Later in *Gay Art*, Falkon speaks of his own work, discussing how he taught himself drawing "by tracing various well-muscled comic book heroes, leaving off clothing and adding erections of male organs."[589] The Second Wave erotic cartoonist Jon Macy, whose work I discuss in depth in Chapter Six, discusses a similar process of learning to draw muscular male figures, originally, from superhero comics, in "Secret Self," a comic strip published in *Gay Comics* no. 25 (dated Spring 1998):

> One of my first erotic experiences with art was tracing the bodies of superheroes in my big brother's comic books. I loved the artists like Gil Kane who drew men so anatomically correct. I would spend hours lovingly copying the figures and then embellishing them with genitalia.[590]

Despite the idealized nature of the bodies depicted, the work of artists like Tom of Finland, Etienne, and so on is relatively "realist" in so far as it is grounded in indexical reality, in spite of the richer range of fantastical possibilities that come with the drawn image. Retaining this anatomically plausible realism is perhaps seen as more erotic and arousing, given a historical situation in which the availability of photographic and filmed evidence of "real"

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[588] Felix Lance Falkon, *Gay Art: A Historic Collection*, New Edition (1972; Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006), 59.
[589] Ibid., 121.
[590] Jon Macy, "Secret Self", *Gay Comics* no. 25, ed. Andy Mangels (Spring 1998), 64.

bodies, genitals and flesh has conditioned audiences to be more aroused by a more "realistic" style.

The six discursive categories Mercer identifies constitute the basis of what he describes as "a gay mythology" in pornographic video; they "identify and articulate the paradigm of discourses and social settings in which homosexual desire can be situated and manifest itself."[591] Sometimes only one discursive formation is deployed, but more often they are used in conjunction with each other: the discourse of the urban gay lifestyle with that of the luxury fantasy for example, or the discourse of the all-male environment with that of S&M fantasy in military-themed videos. Mercer argues that the mythology constructed by gay pornography tells viewers that "there is a plurality to the nature of gay desire,"[592] that there is "more than one form of gay sexual conduct, there are many sets of circumstances in which homosexual desire can manifest itself and, perhaps most significantly, that there is more than one 'type' of gay man."[593]

Mercer's argument challenges critics of pornography who allege that all pornography is damaging and homogenous, best exemplified perhaps by Andrea Dworkin.[594] However, I would argue that Mercer overemphasizes plurality. The great majority of the men depicted in gay pornography – including gay porno comics – are white, youthful, slim, athletic, muscular, and "masculine." Such idealized physiques are such a mainstay of gay porno comics that they might be described as part of the genre's conventional iconography. Indeed, as noted, it is not just that similar types of men appear but also that they are drawn in a similar way. Tom of Finland's "prototype" men are one extreme example, but other artists such as Sean, Stephen, The Hun, and Julius all draw very similarly-featured men. Older men, non-whites, men who are too fat or too thin, and effeminate men are largely absent in gay pornography, rarely appearing as objects of desire.

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[591] Mercer, "In the Slammer," 161.
[592] Ibid., 162.
[593] Ibid., 162-3.
[594] See for example Andrea Dworkin, "Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography and Equality" in *Pornography: Private Right or Public Menace*, ed. Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum (New York: Duke University press, 1991), 56-61.

An *ideal* "type" of gay man is constructed in pornographic images, whether drawn or photographed, in comic books, magazines, films, videos and so on. However, this image is not exclusive to pornography, nor should pornographic images be singled out for criticism. It is, in fact, part of a broader discursive regime of representation that pervades not only pornographic images but also non-pornographic, non-explicit images of gay men in other gay media, including the gay ghetto cartoons and comic strips I discuss in the next section.

Gay Ghetto Comics – Genre Conventions

I will now discuss the generic tendencies of what I call "gay ghetto" comic strips and cartoons produced in the pre-Stonewall and First Waves of the field of American gay male comics. I will argue that, like the gay porno comics, the gay ghetto comics draw on a range of normative discourses to represent an ideal(ized) image of the gay community as a reasonably happy, unified "safe space" for gay men (and, sometimes, lesbians). The discourses that inform gay ghetto comics do the ideological work of the dominant gay habitus, defining what constitutes a good or bad gay community, culture, taste, social life, politics, and identity. Although the gay ghetto comics are somewhat more diverse than the gay porno comics in terms of the kinds of bodies and types of gay men represented, nevertheless, again, the muscled, athletic body is often represented as the gay community's ideal.

Gay ghetto cartoons and strips have been published in gay newspapers, magazines, and in comic book form, as well as collected in anthologies, since the 1960s. Notable examples include Shawn (John Klamik)'s satirical cartoons,[595] appearing in gay newspapers since the mid-1960s; Joe Johnson's *Miss Thing* and *Big Dick*, from circa 1965;[596] Charles Ortleb and Richard Fiala's mid-1970s

[595] Examples of John Klamik's political cartoons as "Shawn", as well as his erotic work done as "Sean", are archived online at www.seantheartist.com. See also Shawn, "Gayer than Strange," in Hall, ed., *No Straight Lines*, 3.
[596] For examples see Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 10-12.

cartoons for *Christopher Street* magazine;[597] Gerard Donelan's *It's A Gay Life* starting in 1977;[598] Bruce Billings' *Castro* starting in 1979;[599] Kurt Erichsen's *Murphy's Manor* (1981) and *The Sparkle Spinsters* (1985);[600] Jerry Mills' *Poppers* (1982);[601] Howard Cruse's *Wendel* (1983);[602] Jeff Krell's *Jayson* (1983);[603] Tim Barela's *Leonard and Larry* (1984);[604] Eric Orner's *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green* (1990);[605] Glen Hanson and Alan Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* (1998); Michael Derry's *Troy* (1998);[606] Greg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast* (1998);[607] and Joe Phillips' late 1990s/early 2000s *Joe Boy* comics for *XY* and *Xodus* magazine.[608]

Whereas gay porno genre comics are defined by their depiction of explicit sex and their intention to arouse, and may be set in various times and places, gay ghetto comics are defined by the physical space in which they are set. This is usually one of the well-known gay urban enclaves in major (usually American) cities, such as West Hollywood in Los Angeles, the Castro in San Francisco, various Manhattan gay neighbourhoods including Chelsea and Greenwich Village, and less-renowned gay neighbourhoods in states like Texas, Minnesota, and so on. The explicit or implied locations of gay ghetto comic strips are, of course, the first important signifiers that signal that this comic is gay, and they central to the gay ghetto comics genre's iconography.

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[597] Charles Ortleb and Richard Fiala, *Le Gay Ghetto: Gay Cartoons from Christopher Street* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980); Charles Ortleb and Richard Fiala, *Relax! This Book Is Only a Phase You're Going Through* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).
[598] Gerard P. Donelan, *Drawing on the Gay Experience: Cartoons from The Advocate* (Los Angeles, CA: Liberation Publications, 1987); Gerard P. Donelan, *Donelan's Back* (Los Angeles, CA: Liberation Publications, 1987). Donelan's cartoons were also reprinted in various issues of *Gay Comix* and *Meatmen*.
[599] For examples see Triptow, *Gay Comics*, 45.
[600] Examples of Erichsen's Murphy's Manor are archived online at www.kurterichsen.com. See also Erichsen, "The Sparkle Spinsters in 'Home Movies'," in Hall, ed., *No Straight Lines*, 47-52.
[601] Jerry Mills's *Poppers* was reprinted in various issues of *Gay Comix* and *Meatmen*. See also Jerry Mills, *Poppers*, in Hall, ed., *No Straight Lines*, 53-55, and 96-97.
[602] Collected in Howard Cruse, *Wendel All Together* (Chicago, Illinois: Olmstead Press, 2001).
[603] Krell's *Jayson* has been collected in numerous volumes, including Jeff Krell, *Jayson: Best of the 80s* (Los Angeles, CA: Ignite! Entertainment, 2005).
[604] Barela's strip has been collected in a number of books, notably Tim Barela, *Domesticity isn't Pretty: A Leonard & Larry Collection* (Minneapolis, MN: Palliard Press, 1993).
[605] Orner, *Ethan Green*.
[606] Derry, *Troy*.
[607] Fox, *Kyle's*.
[608] Joe Philips, *Adventures of a Joe Boy! Vol. 1* (Berlin: Bruno Gmunder, 2004).

As Alexandra Chasin describes, such locations have come to "stand for" the "gay community" in America's popular imagination.[609] Thus, setting a strip in one of these centres is a way of signalling the comic's "gayness." Of course, it also provides a "realistic" reason to have so many LGBTQ characters, all of whom know and hang out with each other. The main action in "gay ghetto" comics tends to take place in and around specifically gay environments – a gay boarding-house (*Murphy's Manor*), a gay bed-and-breakfast (*Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*), a leather fetish store (*Leonard and Larry*), and the offices of a gay news-magazine (*Wendel*), as well as gay bars, gyms, dance clubs, beaches, bathhouses, and Gay Pride festivals (many of the strips). Characters in gay ghetto comics will often use gay slang when speaking to each other, and the strips will include both verbal and visual references to various gay "types" or "tribes" such as gym queens, drag queens, leather men, bears, and so on.

As discussed earlier, while the dominant tendency in the gay porno comics is toward a more "realistic" style of drawing – what Witek calls the "naturalistic mode" – artists working within the gay ghetto genre tend to draw in a slightly more schematic and simplified style – often in what Witek calls the "cartoon mode." Again, I emphasize that this is a dominant tendency rather than an absolute rule. As Witek describes,

> The cartoon mode accounts for many of the greatest achievements in the history of comics, from George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* to Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, the Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comics of Carl Barks, and John Stanley's *Little Lulu*. Visually, the cartoon mode is marked by simplified and exaggerated characters which are created primarily by line and contour. Panel backgrounds and physical settings are often minimally represented. Little attempt is made to create a sustained illusion of three-dimensional space by such means as shading or the use of linear perspective.[610]

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[609] Chasin, *Selling Out,* 169.

[610] Witek, "Comics Modes," 29.

What Witek calls the cartoon mode corresponds closely to what Cohn describes as Barksian American Visual Language, "Barksian" referring to the aforementioned Carl Barks, who most famously drew a range of comics published by Disney.[611] Barksian AVL is extremely diverse but tends to highlight certain features while downplaying others; as Cohn puts

> . . . cartoony images simplify images to their essential components while exaggerating the remaining features. Often, this emphasizes the basic geometric shapes that underlie figures, in many cases resulting in a pronounced roundedness or angularity to the figures. Because some features are heightened at the expense of others, many features of anatomy are often downplayed, altered, or omitted. Characters may not have elbows or knees, or at least their joints only appear when bent, while muscles are only drawn when emphasized (like when flexing).[612]

Bodies are not always drawn with realistic proportions in the cartoon mode, with certain extremities – especially noses, hands, and feet – sometimes being exaggerated, which is why this "cartoony" visual dialect has traditionally been referred to as the "big-foot style." Whereas, in the naturalistic mode of comics, faces tend to be drawn in a way that approaches or at least gestures toward photorealism – with eyes and noses for example being drawn with a reasonable amount of detail – it is much more likely for eyes, in the cartoon mode, to be represented schematically for example by a pair of dots, or noses by a simple curved line. As Witek notes, too, the cartoon mode uses the icons known as "emanata" more extensively than the "naturalistic mode": "the sweat beads, dust clouds, speed lines, and many other symbols that have become closely associated with traditional humor cartooning."[613]

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[611] Cohn, *Visual Language*, 141.
[612] Ibid., 141-142.
[613] Witek, "Comics Modes," 29.

The "cartoon mode" approach adopted by the creators of the majority of gay ghetto comics creators may be related to the tone of the gay ghetto narratives, which tends toward the humorous and comedic. Because of their focus on relationships and their episodic format – many are serialized weekly or biweekly in gay newspapers – these strips are sometimes described as "soap operas," and because of their humorous nature they are even more often likened to "sitcoms" ("situation comedies"). Tim Barela, creator of *Leonard & Larry*, himself described the strip as "very much a sitcom and a soap opera,"[614] and Jennequin, describes strips such as *Wendel*, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and *Leonard and Larry* as "gay sitcoms."[615] Simplified, schematic or "cartoony" styles in "heterosexual," mainstream comic books and strips have tended to be used for humorous stories; as Witek notes, the cartoon mode has been strongly associated with "verbal humor and slapstick comedy"[616] in mainstream comics and cartoons, and LGBT comics generally follow this broad tendency.

In some of the gay ghetto comics and cartoons, a different scenario and set of characters is presented in each instalment. Gerard Donelan's *It's A Gay Life* cartoons and Joe Phillips' *Joe Boy* strips, for example, do not depict rounded characters in ongoing storylines from instalment to instalment, but create a sense of continuity with certain types of gay men within specific social contexts. However, the majority of gay ghetto comics tend to feature an ensemble cast of characters, largely of one gender, though there may also be a couple of characters of the opposite sex. The narratives tend to revolve around a group of gay friends, and are concerned with these characters' interrelationships, romantic and sexual entanglements, and family dramas. The latter involve the biological families of certain characters but more often the gay "chosen family." Because of the specifically gay settings and because the range of characters

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[614] Andy Mangels, "The Last of Leonard & Larry," *The Advocate* No. 900 (October 14, 2003), 90.
[615] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA," 40
[616] Ibid.

depicted are usually reasonably diverse in terms of ethnicity[617] and sometimes gender, gay ghetto comics can be understood as representing a specific vision of the gay community: they depict a cross-section of a diverse but unified ideal gay community. Jerry Mills' *Poppers*, Glenn Hanson and Alan Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* and Michael Derry's *Troy* are all examples of the gay ghetto sitcom strip that follow this pattern.

Gerard Donelan's *It's a Gay Life* cartoons (**Fig. 4-4**) are an early example of the gay ghetto genre. They feature gay men who are for the most part young, white and middle-class, though there are occasionally Black and Asian characters featured. They are conventionally attractive and fashionable in accordance with the dominant gay trends of the late 1970s and the 1980s. However, they are drawn in a much more "cartoony" style than the attractive characters in the gay porno comics, and are not so often as hyper-muscled and idealized. Even when drawing athletic characters, Donelan does not render every contour of the muscular male physique in as much detail as many of the gay porno artists do, and rather than drawing naturalistic faces, Donelan usually chooses to represent eyes with a pair of dots and noses with schematic geometric shapes. The men Donelan draws tend to be portrayed hanging out in gay bars and dance clubs, going shopping, and in private spaces such as the homes of domesticated couples or casual sex partners. The captions accompanying Donelan's single-panel illustrations tend to parody or make reference to stereotypically "gay" preoccupations with cruising, fashion and body image, and feature humorous sexual scenarios. These are all of the signifiers of the dominant gay male habitus as it emerged in the urban enclaves of American cities in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

Cartoonist Jerry Mills writes that "Donelan captured perfectly the smugness and self-satisfaction that later came to be known as the 'clone look,' but done with affection, not malice."[618] The affection noted by Mills with which

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[617] To varying degrees – one in three of the main characters in Jerry Mills' *Poppers* is black, the other two are white; Bechdel's *DTWOF*'s much larger cast includes various black, Asian and Latina characters in addition to whites.
[618] Mills, "Introduction," 11.

Fig. 4-4 – Gerard P. Donelan, "A Donelan Look at Men." *Gay Comix* no. 13, np.

Donelan depicts the gay milieu he focuses on is one of the most prominent features of the "gay ghetto" sub-genre. This affectionate portrayal of the gay ghetto and its mores is apparent in the majority of cartoons and strips that began to appear in gay and lesbian publications from the 1960s, and into the

twenty-first century. The gentle humour of these narratives is reflected in their approach to the "cartoon mode," which is stylized and caricatured to be sure, but never cruelly so. Donelan's style could be categorized as falling within Cohn's definition of "Barksian AVL" and indeed Howard Cruse's *Wendel*, Jerry Mills' *Poppers*, and Glen Hanson's *Chelsea Boys* all be could be described in this way.

As in gay pornographic narratives, a range of normative discourses operate in the narratives of gay ghetto comics, doing the ideological work of the dominant gay habitus and defining what constitutes a good or bad gay community, culture, social life, politics, and identity. These include the discourses of the ideal community; gay pride and politics; the happy gay couple; and the hedonistic gay single life. Of course, not every gay ghetto strip draws on all of these discourses, but most of them draw on a variety of them simultaneously.

Along with the setting, the discourse of the ideal community is a defining trait of the gay ghetto genre. The focus of the gay ghetto comics is on the creation of an emphatically and openly gay culture that is often positioned against dominant heterosexual culture. The gay urban ghetto is typically portrayed as a welcoming haven, away from the pressures of the homophobic heterosexual world. As Sewell describes in his essay "Queer Characters in Comic Strips," characters in gay comics are sometimes shown feeling uncomfortable with having to hide their sexuality in the straight world, and experience their gay community as a place of refuge, but also as a space where problems like internalized homophobia can be discussed:

> Characters who cannot or will not face up to being queer, such as [professional baseball player] Brad in *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast*, have internal battles as well as external confrontations [with other gay characters] about their unwillingness to explore and . . . own up to their sexual orientation.[619]

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[619] Edward H. Sewell Jr., "Queer Characters in Comic Strips" in *Comics & Ideology*, eds. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 271.

In spite of such confrontations in strips like *Wendel*, *Poppers*, and *Leonard & Larry* in the 1980s, and *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast*, *Troy* and *Chelsea Boys* in the 1990s, the characters in these gay micro-communities are ultimately represented as being very much "at home" with one another and within their specific gay urban social milieus. In gay ghetto comics, then, the gay community is a place where one is safe, where all members of the community – underneath any conflicts – essentially understand and support one another. Disagreements over contentious issues, such as coming out, internalized homophobia or AIDS-phobia, "far from being dangerous or destructive, enable the community to develop and to improve itself."[620] Here, the gay community, and the concept of "community" more generally, is represented as "a safe place you share with others like you, a 'home'"[621] – sometimes literally, as in *Murphy's Manor* and *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*.

Some gay ghetto strips draw on the discourse of the happy gay couple, focusing mainly on a gay couple as well as their circle of friends. These include *A Couple of Guys*, *Leonard and Larry*, and *Wendel*. Howard Cruse's *Wendel* evolved from being a "single life" strip to one which focused on coupledom, as the title character met a man named Ollie and started to form a relationship. Cruse describes the transition of the strip as relating to both the historical context of AIDS and his own personal experience of meeting his long-term partner:

> At that time [in the early 1980s], the AIDS epidemic was really clearly not a temporary phenomenon, and suddenly the idea about the gay single life of having one night stands, it was hard to be light-hearted about that, and also it was ground that was being well-covered in other gay fiction. There was a lot of stuff about being a single gay person and having sex, and I felt I was doing a re-tread of other stuff. And meanwhile the most significant thing going on in my life was my relationship with

[620] Sullivan, *Queer Theory*, 137.
[621] Ibid.

Eddie, and I thought it would be most interesting to explore the process of a relationship forming.[622]

The discourse of gay politics and pride is also often important to gay ghetto strips. Even in the least political comics, characters are shown once a year participating in Gay Pride celebrations. Cruse's *Wendel* is often even more political than this. In a sequence of twelve episodes in 1989,[623] Cruse told the story of Wendel's best friend Sterno's infatuation with the body fascist "gym god" Duncan, a devotee of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy who insists that

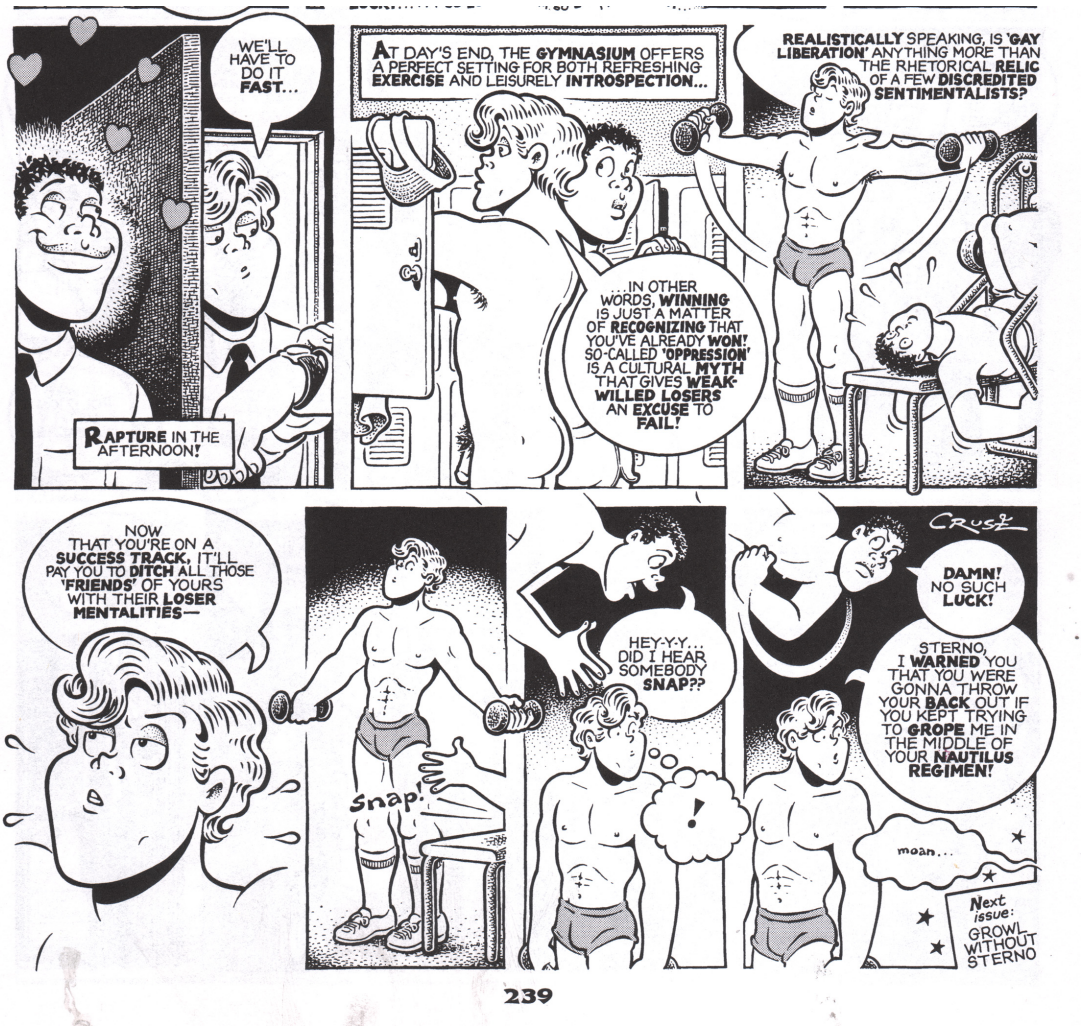

Fig. 4-5 –Howard Cruse. *Wendel All Together*, 239 (excerpt).

[622] Cruse, interview.
[623] Cruse, *Wendel All Together*, 225-247.

politically organizing against homophobia and other social injustices is a waste of energy (**Fig. 4-5**). Sterno seems bewitched by Duncan, becoming isolated from all his old friends and even quitting his job at the politically-aware *Gayblaze* magazine. Eventually, however, Sterno, missing his old friends, attends a gay demonstration where he apprehends a gay-basher, acquiring some bruises in the process. Going home he finds Duncan in bed with another man; Duncan's spell over Sterno is finally broken and Sterno kicks him out of his house.

Cruse's *Wendel*, then, draws strongly on Gay Liberationist discourses that see the community's well-being as centred around political awareness and campaigning for social justice. Cruse critiques certain elements of the gay scene, including body fascism and the tendency of some gay groups to promote a very narrow, conservative idea of what constitutes "acceptable behaviour" as well as "positive role models" for the LGBT community. However, his characters are very politically aware and devoted to fighting for gay rights, not just for themselves but also for other members of the LGBT community. Ollie and Sterno work at a politically-conscious gay newsmagazine, and the majority of the characters in *Wendel* are politically aware, attending various demonstrations throughout the strip. None of the recurring male characters is portrayed as devastatingly handsome or extremely fashion-conscious. Instead, Wendel, Ollie and Sterno are shown to be reasonably attractive with "ordinary" or "average" rather than exceptionally muscular bodies. The most muscular and conventionally sexy character is also the least politically active one – the "gym god" Duncan, who is portrayed as selfish, vain, emotionally cruel and shallow. Cruse's *Wendel*, then, critiques what Cruse sees as negative aspects of the gay scene but ultimately affirms the ideal of a unified and politically conscious gay community.

Most often, perhaps, gay ghetto comics draw on the discourse of the hedonistic gay single life, which is not too different from Mercer's description of the urban gay lifestyle discourse in porn narratives as revolving around "youth,

physical beauty, sexual availability and promiscuity."[624] The hedonistic gay single life is portrayed in strips such as Jerry Mills' *Poppers*, Hanson and Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys*, and Joe Phillips's *Joe Boy* strips. The hedonism discourse works in conjunction with the discourse of the idealized gay community. In strips like *Poppers*, *Chelsea Boys* and *Troy*, the gay community is a utopian refuge, in part because of the pleasures of sexual freedom, beauty and promiscuity that it offers.

In drawing on these varied discourses, these comics construct a dominant gay habitus, a visible and "typical" gayness. In doing so, they also naturalize and reify certain culturally and historically specific gay scenes, lifestyles, and mores as exemplary of "what the gay community is *really* like," presenting an image of the gay community and gay identity as relatively unified and stable. While some strips – particularly Cruse's *Wendel* – critique negative aspects of gay male culture, such as body fascism, the majority tend to be less critical.

Other strips, like Jerry Mills' *Poppers*, and Hanson and Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys*, take an ambivalent position with regard to representing gay sexual culture and the idealized gay body. Jerry Mills' *Poppers* was published from 1982 until Jerry Mills' death in 1993, and focused on gay male promiscuity and the hedonism of the 1980s West Hollywood scene, which it poked fun at and glorified in equal measure. The sexual antics of blonde, muscular party-boy Billy are regarded with a mixture of envy and cynicism by his neighbours, the under-confident Yves and the worldly black queen André, as well as by Buster, a crab who has taken up permanent residence in Billy's crotch as a result of his promiscuity. The three main characters in Hanson and Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* (published between 1998 and 2005) replicated the central trio of Jerry Mills' *Poppers*. Billy, Yves, and André were reborn as best friends and roommates: blonde hunk Sky, average and under-confident Nathan, and flamboyant black queen Soirée, and transplanted from Hollywood to New York. Though their styles do differ, the influence of American animated films and TV shows, such as

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[624] Mercer, "In the Slammer," 158.

Fig. 4-6 –Jerry Mills, *Poppers*. Reprinted in *Gay Comix* no. 9, Winter 1986-87, np.

Fig. 4-7 –Glen Hanson and Allan Neuwirth, *Chelsea Boys*, 17.

those produced by Disney and Hanna-Barbera, is evident in both Mills' *Poppers* and Hanson's *Chelsea Boys*.

Yves in *Poppers* and Nathan in *Chelsea Boys* are depicted as less confident, less fashionable, and less conventionally attractive than most of the other gay characters in their respective strips. In each of the strips, these "average" characters stand in counterpoint to a much more sexually confident and conventionally attractive character – blonde hunks Billy and Sky in *Poppers* and *Chelsea Boys*, respectively (see **Figs. 4-6** and 4-**7**). In their respective strips, Yves and Nathan are depicted stereotypically as the "less attractive friend" of the "hot stud," who embodies the qualities that the less confident characters aspire to.

However, despite these more complex examples, those strips which draw heavily on the discourse of the hedonistic single life – such as Hansen and

Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* and Michael Derry's *Troy* – tend to represent an idealized version of the gay male body as typical, valuable and desirable, while often marginalizing or devaluing gay male bodies that fail to conform to this ideal. In gay ghetto comics like Michael Derry's *Troy*, Greg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast* and Joe Phillips's *Joe Boy*, virtually all the principal characters are conventionally attractive. The vast majority of these characters conform to certain activities that Michel Foucault might describe as "disciplinary regimes" or "normalizing practices": gym routines, dieting, waxing and shaving the body, as well as other fashionable body-management practices.

In one episode of Greg Fox's *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*, a minor character, Ferrelli, criticizes gay magazines for never showing "regular gay guys" like him: "Guys with a *gut* . . . guys with receding *hairlines* . . . guys who don't *live* for *gay clubs*?" Ferrelli is indeed represented with a receding hairline and a beer-gut,

Fig. 4-8 –Greg Fox, *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast*, 108 (Excerpt).

and enjoys listening to heavy metal bands rather than disco. Fox evidently intends his portrayal of Ferrelli to bring more diversity to the strip. However, Ferrelli only appears in *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast* intermittently, and his critique is undercut because all the principal characters in the strip have muscular physiques, often shown off in "beefcake"-style shots of the characters standing around the B&B in their underpants. (Interestingly, *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast* is one of the more naturalistically-drawn of the gay ghetto strips, its visual style reminiscent of mainstream superhero comics and the gay porno genre, although it is never sexually explicit.) For the most part these characters tend to be shown falling in and out of love – and bed – with other men with similar physiques, who embody the tastes and practices of the dominant gay habitus (**Fig. 4-8**).

A similar representation of the gay male body can be found in many stories by Joe Phillips. These are also drawn in a slightly more naturalistic mode than the "cartoonier" gay ghetto comics, though they incorporate a lot of caricature. The story "Club Survival 101"[625] follows its main character, college guy Cam, as he visits a gay club for the first time. His friend Trevor sees him, and is quick to criticize the way he is dressed: "Who told you to dress like a confused straight boy? I take my eyes off you for two minutes and you leave the house looking like beach trade." A stranger comes up behind Cam and declares, "Oh no she didn't! Yer wearin' A+F after sundown! What in gay hell is wrong with you, Mary? This ain't no rave!" The stranger leads Cam to a back-room where a complete transformation of hair and clothing takes place, before Cam is returned to the dance floor (**Fig. 4-9**).

In his essay "Queer Characters in Comic Strips," Sewell praises this story for depicting the central character's transition from straight to gay culture; as well as being "restyled and recreated into an appropriately queer image that fits into the queer club scene," Cam now also "behaves in a manner appropriate to the gay clubscene."[626] For Sewell, "Club Survival 101" is an authentic depiction

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[625] Joe Phillips, "Club Survival 101", *Adventures of a Joe Boy!* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder), np.
[626] Sewell, "Queer Characters in Comic Strips," 266.

Fig. 4-9 – Joe Philips, "Club Survival 101." *Adventures of a Joe Boy* Vol. 1, np.

of gay male experience and identity, in part because it emphasizes the role of clothing in gay culture that distinguishes it from heterosexual culture.[627]

However, Phillips's strip could be interpreted quite differently, as propaganda for the benefits of conformity to the dominant gay habitus. The "gay world" represented in "Club Survival 101," populated by youthful, slim, muscular, fashionable, and predominantly white clubbers, resembles the glossy, marketable images of the gay community found in the advertising and editorial of numerous other gay magazines. In this and other *Joe Boy* comics, if a young gay man does not conform to the dominant gay habitus they are either "clueless" and simply in need of a makeover, or they are doomed to be mocked for not being fashionable, ignored because they are too fat, or stood up by their dates – and this is all presented as "fun". What Signorile describes as "body fascism" is presented as the norm in Joe Phillips's comics.

Sewell is of course correct to point to the important role played by clothing in queer subcultures, and as I have previously noted, queer comic strips function as archives of LGBT subcultural styles. However, the story "Club Survival 101" goes further, functioning as an advertisement for a specific fashion retail company. At the bottom of the last page of the strip is the notice: "Character clothing and merchandise can be found at http://www.xgear.com," a blatant example of "product placement" within a comic.[628] It is not surprising that this happens in a gay comic commissioned by and published in a glossy gay lifestyle magazine like *XY*, which, like the majority of fashion and lifestyle magazines exists primarily to provide a "nurturing environment" for its advertisers. The strip is essentially an advertisement for fashionable clothes aimed at young gay men, attempting to shape the tastes and consumption practices of its readers.

Overall, the characters in the gay ghetto comics are presented as reasonably happy and "at home" within their gay communities and gay culture.

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[627] Ibid.

[628] Product placement in comics is relatively rare compared to product placement in film and television, though it is a phenomena that is slowly growing; anecdotal evidence suggests that writers and artists working on comic books for mainstream companies such as Marvel and DC are encouraged to include product placement in their stories.

While there are sometimes conflicts and disagreements between the characters, the gay urban ghetto is represented as a safe space in contrast to the heterosexual world, and there is a sense of underlying faith in the gay community. None of the characters in *Wendel*, *Poppers*, or *Chelsea Boys* ever seem *so* alienated from gay culture that they deliberately distance themselves from it or reject it. Rather, they are immersed in gay ghetto life.

Conclusion

The gay ghetto and the gay porno genres represent paradigms within the gay male comics field as a whole, and retain a strong influence even when creators engage with other comic book genres, such as the superhero genre. For example, Andy Mangels' gay superhero strip *Sentinel* (later renamed *Pride*), which appeared in a number of issues of *Gay Comics*,[629] starred with the eponymous Sentinel, a superhero who acted as a guardian and representative of the gay community. He patrolled gay urban enclaves preventing anti-gay hate crimes, and participated in gay events such as Pride marches – all elements that bear the stamp of the gay ghetto strip's discourses. On the other hand, Patrick Fillion's *Naked Justice*[630] is a gay porno comic "dressed" (or in this case underdressed) with the superhero genre's conventional iconography, the title character being a well-endowed, super-powered hunk with a revealing costume, who is depicted both fighting crime and in explicit hard-core sex scenes with other superheroes and villains.

As I have attempted to show throughout this chapter, both the gay porno and the gay ghetto comics are concerned with constructing a variety of norms, and contribute to shaping the dominant gay habitus. Both genres generate discourses about what constitutes a "good" or "bad," "ideal," and even "authentic" gay identity and habitus. However, in the 1990s, these generic paradigms would start to be questioned and redefined by a new generation of

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[629] Mangels' *Sentinel/Pride* featured in *Gay Comics* no. 16-18, 20, and 23-25.
[630] Patrick Fillion, *The Incredibly Hung Naked Justice* no. 1-2 (Coquitlam, British Columbia: Class Comics, 2011).

LGBT cartoonists emerging against the background of the new, often aggressive, "queer" approach to identity and politics, and influenced by the alternative comics and zine scenes that had been growing throughout the 1980s. Often feeling that their work would not "fit in" with the glossy, mainstream gay magazines, and inspired by the burgeoning zine culture's "do-it-yourself" ideals, new LGBT cartoonists began to produce and distribute their work through self-published comics or small independent presses. These cartoonists were of course critical of homophobia, but far less interested in affirming the dominant gay habitus or any strong sense of shared gay identity and community. Rather they were much more concerned with focusing on their personal lives and identities, critiquing mainstream gay culture as conformist and commercialized, and creating alternative visions of queer life and culture. In the three following chapters, I discuss the ways in which the new, alternative queer male cartoonists approached the codes and conventions of the gay ghetto comic strip and the gay porno genre.

Chapter Five: Alternative Gay Ghetto Comics - Nerds, Punks, Shy Boys

This chapter focuses on what I call "alternative gay ghetto comics," narratives by Second- and Third Wave cartoonists that respond to the conventions of the gay ghetto comics genre which, as discussed in Chapter Three, is one of the two dominant generic paradigms to emerge in the First Wave of gay male comics production. I argue that the conventions, characteristics and representational regimes of the First Wave gay ghetto comics participate in the construction of a dominant gay habitus. Starting in the 1990s, queer cartoonists challenged many of the norms of this dominant habitus by starting to produce "alternative gay ghetto comics." Mainstream gay culture is critiqued and questioned in these stories, which take up many of the conventions of the gay ghetto comic, but play around with them. They subvert and redefine the character types, themes and settings of the gay ghetto comics to resist and redefine hegemonic constructions of gay identity and community.

In this chapter, I will firstly discuss these alternative gay ghetto narratives generally, focusing on examples from the work of cartoonists Nick Leonard and Michael Fahy to show some of the variety of what I call "alternative gay ghetto comics." I will then go on to focus in more depth on the comics of Robert Kirby, whose *oeuvre* constitutes the main case study of this chapter. I argue that Kirby is important to understanding the alternative gay ghetto comic for two reasons. First, he acted as editor and tastemaker in the field of LGBT alternative comics. Second, his themes are highly representative of the broad sweep of alternative gay ghetto comics. They include a critique of mainstream gay culture, the portrayal of alienation, and stories of love, sex and relationships.

In the present section I will discuss some of the general characteristics of what I am calling the alternative gay ghetto comics. These alternative comics, I argue, take up some of the conventions and discourses employed by the more traditional gay ghetto comics (discussed in Chapter Four) but are distinctive – they adapt, question, and subvert these conventions. They are similar to the more traditional gay ghetto comics because they often adopt a similar "sitcom"

style format – Jean-Paul Jennequin, for example, classifies Hansen and Neuwirth's *Chelsea Boys* and Gregg Fox's Kyle's *Bed and Breakfast,* as well as Robert Kirby's *Curbside,* as "gay sitcoms," but does not analyse the differences between them.[631] However, I consider *Chelsea Boys* and *Kyle's Bed & Breakfast* as fitting into the traditional mode of what I call the gay ghetto comic, whereas I see Kirby's *Curbside* as an alternative gay ghetto strip, that consciously and more pointedly critiques the shortcomings of mainstream gay culture and rather than consolidating the dominant gay habitus, instead posits an alternative habitus.

Like the more conventional gay ghetto comics, alternative ghetto comics are often set within an urban gay community and amongst a group of queer friends and/or lovers; however, they will tend to focus on characters who avow a sense of alienation from the gay mainstream. While the focus of the mainstream gay ghetto comics is on building and consolidating a distinctive sense of gay community, the alternative responses to the gay ghetto comic tend to overtly critique or parody many of the stereotypes of mainstream gay culture. While the mainstream gay ghetto comics do tend to present *affectionate* parodies from an "insider" point of view, the alternative gay comics' lampoons of gay culture are more pointed, presented from the perspective of characters who consider themselves to be "outsiders."

The majority of alternative gay ghetto comics are also similar to most traditional ones in terms of style; they tend toward stylized and abstracted modes of drawing that may be referred to as more "cartoony" than "realistic." Most of them could be placed along the right of the x-axis of McCloud's Big Triangle of Style and can be classified as working in what Josef Witek calls the "cartoon mode" of comics (discussed in Chapter Four). The work of both Robert Kirby and Nick Leonard can be considered "cartoony" in this sense, conforming in some ways to the key features of the Barksian American Visual Language described by Neil Cohn (and also discussed in Chapter Four): the bodies both Kirby and Leonard draw emphasize "the basic geometric shapes that underlie figures," meaning the bodies they draw often have a pronounced angularity or

[631] Jennequin, "Gay Comics USA", 42.

roundedness, as well as exaggerated and non-naturalistic proportions.[632] They also make relatively little attempt to use linear perspective to consistently create an illusion of three-dimensional space. More or less the same could be said of the work of Michael Fahy. Although he uses more shading and cross-hatching, the bodies he draws are usually slightly more naturalistically-proportioned, and there is more sense of perspective in his comics. Nevertheless, his drawings of bodies and faces cannot be said to approach naturalism in the same way that gay porno comics artists like Tom of Finland or Etienne can be said to approach.

I have based my classification of certain strips as "alternative gay ghetto comics" on a study of the work of a range of queer male cartoonists who started publishing their work in the 1990s, and whose comics contained such critical representations of mainstream gay culture and/or narratives focusing on gay characters alienated from that culture. Many of these cartoonists self-published their own comics as well as having strips published in anthologies, most significantly the two Robert Kirby-edited queer comics anthologies *Strange Looking Exile* and *Boy Trouble*. Alongside Kirby himself, cartoonists who have created what I consider "alternative gay ghetto" strips include Nick Leonard (*Ixnay!: A Crop of Nick*),[633] Michael Fahy (*A Thousand Dreams Interpreted*),[634] Tim Piotrowski (*Nitsy and Bitsy*, *Glitch*),[635] Russ Turk (*Queer Boys*),[636] as well as more recently Matt Fagan (*Love*),[637] and Ed Luce (*Wuvable Oaf*).[638] Victor Hodge's *Black Gay Boy Fantasy*[639] and many of the strips in Jaime Cortez's *A La Brava*[640] can be considered alternative gay ghetto comics, too, because of their focus, respectively, on all-African American and all-Latina/o LGBT communities,

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[632] Cohn, *Visual Language*, 141.
[633] Nick Leonard, *Ixnay!: A Crop of Nick* (San Francisco, CA: Self-published, 1995).
[634] Michael Fahy, *Litany* (Philadelphia, PA: Self-published, 1996); Michael Fahy, *Ten Thousand Dreams Interpreted* (Philadelphia, PA: Self-published, 2007).
[635] Tim Piotrowski, *Glitch* no. 1-3 (Chicago, IL: Self-published, 1996-1997); Tim Piotrowski, *Nitsy and Bitsy* (Chicago, IL: Self-published, 2007).
[636] Russ Turk, *Queer Boys* no. 1-2 (New York, NY: Self-published, 1997-1998).
[637] Matt Fagan, *Love* no. 1-3 (Chicago, IL: Self-published, 2002-2006).
[638] Ed Luce, *Wuvable Oaf* no. 0-4 (San Francisco, CA: Göteblud Press, 2008-2014).
[639] Victor Hodge, *Black Gay Boy Fantasy* no. 1-26 (Washington, DC: Self-published, 1998-2011).
[640] Jaime Cortez, *A La Brava* no. 1-4 (San Francisco, CA: Self-published, 1996-1997).

whereas the majority of traditional gay ghetto comics focus on a multi-cultural (though usually mainly white) gay friendship group.

Before going on to discuss Kirby's work in depth, in the next section I will discuss the work of Nick Leonard and Michael Fahy, whose comics share certain themes with those of Kirby – particularly a critique of gay consumer culture and "body fascism." I then present a short biography of Robert Kirby before going on to discuss the three key ways in which his comics adapt and subvert the conventions of the gay ghetto comics genre.

Alternative Gay Ghetto Comics Themes

Recurring themes in such "alternative gay ghetto" portrayals of mainstream and alternative gay lives and communities include: a criticism of gay "body fascism" combined with an affirmation of a wider range of body types as potentially desirable or attractive; a (partial or complete) rejection of the music, style, and rituals associated with mainstream gay club culture, combined with an embrace of alternative subcultural music scenes such as punk and indie, and their associated "anti-fashion" styles; a critique of gay consumerism and commercialization in contrast with the do-it-yourself ethos of comics and alternative culture more broadly; and a complex depiction of sex that does not shy away from representing the problems and anxieties that might come with it.

Nick Leonard's short strip "Little Homer Sexual and his Long-Suffering Gay Parents"[641] (**Fig. 5-1**) presents a savage parody of the dominant gay habitus and mainstream gay scene. Leonard describes feeling alienated from mainstream gay culture:

> I felt a bit outside of the standard gay community, see, and none of my comics were really generically gay, about guys in discos or anything, because that really wasn't much my life . . . And I think at the time there

[641] Nick Leonard, "Little Homer Sexual and his Long-Suffering Gay Parents," *Boy Trouble* no. 2 (Summer 1995), ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (Seattle, WA: DK Press), 15. Reprinted in Kirby and Kelly, *Book of Boy Trouble*, 73.

was really a lot of wanting, the gay community seemed to want to either conform or ghettoize itself, neither of which really appealed to me at all.[642]

As Shane Phelan writes, the gay community is so often represented in gay discourses as "a source of strength, . . . as the opposite of alienation"[643] and as a "family of choice," an alternative to the heterosexual family in which many

Fig. 5-1 – Nick Leonard, "Little Homer Sexual and His Long-Suffering Gay Parents." *Book of Boy Trouble*, 73.

queer people inhabit an uncomfortable or ambivalent position. The heterosexual family is itself often understood as a microcosmic version of "community," and yet, as Phelan asks, "How many of us experienced a family or home that was in fact what the rhetoric of community invokes as a model?"[644] The discontent, boredom, conflict and alienation often experienced as a queer member of a primarily heterosexual family may be re-experienced in new and different forms as one tries to get close to one's new "gay family." Leonard visualizes this conflict within the "gay family" quite literally in "Little Homer Sexual."

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[642] Nick Leonard. Interview by author. Tape recording. San Francisco, August 4th 2008.
[643] Shane Phelan, *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 82
[644] Ibid., 83

In the first panel of the strip, Leonard depicts two "mainstream gays," one dark-haired and one blonde. Otherwise, they are identical to one another, wearing matching white vests which show off their matching muscles. Their athletic bodies and their attire all mark their participation in a dominant gay habitus, its related rituals and fashions. They would be similar to the muscled "clones" in older gay comics, but Leonard's scribbly, scratchy, and even amateurish style eschews the gloss of more mainstream gay ghetto comics; these "mainstream gays" are drawn schematically, and caricatured with little if any affection. Checking their mailbox, one comments to the other: "That's funny, we should have gotten the new 'Shocking Gray' catalogue by now…" The catalogue is a symbol of gay consumerism, another marker of participation in a dominant gay habitus – in this strip it is also a symbol of conformity. The next panel shows their adoptive son, "Homer Sexual" (a reference to cartoon character Homer Simpson whose son Bart is similarly mischievous) using said catalogue as toilet paper, his head turned to the reader and grinning maniacally – Leonard's point is clear!

In the third panel, Homer is sitting on the sofa angrily thumbing through a book while his parents hover over him; Homer's style – his spiked, punky hair and the Anarchy symbol on his T-shirt – marks him as culturally distinct from his "gym clone" dads, and is in line with the "punk," DIY feel of Leonard's crude and even slapdash drawing style. "Well, I hope that 'Bob and Rod' book we got little Homer helps him become a little more 'well-adjusted'!" worries one father. "It should set a good example," says the other. "Bob and Rod" of course are the openly gay bodybuilding couple Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris, promoted in the early 1990s as "positive gay role models," based on their physical appearance and their status as a "happy, successful," and married gay couple. The book is, most probably, their autobiography *Straight from the Heart: A Love Story*.[645]

Queer critic Daniel Harris describes this example of gay autobiography and self-help literature as "propaganda that . . . mesmerizes [the gay reader] with a constant flicker of subliminal messages attesting to the normality of gay

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[645] Rod and Bob Jackson-Paris, *Straight From the Heart: A Love Story* (New York: Time Warner, 1995).

life."[646] Harris is critical of the politically conservative message of many such books:

> The gay movement is bent on disseminating images of happy, healthy homosexuals who have abandoned their compulsive cruising . . . and become instead unthreatening replicas of mild-mannered heterosexuals who . . . go to church, play sports, get married, adopt children, and take turns doing the dishes and taking out the garbage.[647]

Like many queer theorists, Harris is critical of heteronormativity and assimilationism – the idea that LGBT people are being encouraged by the mainstream of the gay political movement to emulate heterosexual ideas of what a normal romantic relationship, and law-abiding citizenship, involves.[648] As in many of these queer theory discourses, a "normal," "heterosexualized," and suburban life – like the one described by Harris above – is represented as boring. It is contrasted to a sexually hedonistic, urban, and more authentically "queer" life, which tends to be presented as more personally fulfilling as well as more politically resistant.

However, the critique of gay conformity and the representation of the dominant gay habitus found in Leonard's strip is somewhat different from Harris's description. Although Leonard's comics critique political conservatism, the gay club scene is not represented as the more desirable alternative. Rather, it is also savagely parodied. As Homer leaves the house in the fourth panel, his fathers are hopeful, wondering if he is going out to "join a gym," "shop for clothes," "buy a CD by Annie Lennox or Pet Shop Boys," "'cruise' the 'Castro'," or "dance all night on speed at 'Colossus'!" Any of these activities seem desirable to the Homer's "clone" fathers, and none of them, it must be noted, involve becoming a church-going suburbanite.

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[646] Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 263.
[647] Ibid., 269.
[648] See for example, David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards A Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

To these "clones," such activities as going to the gym, cruising, shopping, or dancing at specific nightclubs, would signify positive assimilation into the dominant gay habitus. Leonard, mocking these "clones," is eager here to question the kinds of practices that symbolize adherence to "mainstream" gay cultural values – the emphasis on crafting an acceptably "sexy" body, and on drugs, cruising, and sex. Homer's fathers' hopes are dashed in the last panel which depicts them looking on in horror as Homer spray-paints "Bob and Rod are fags!" onto a neighbourhood fence. Homer's use of homophobic language and anti-social graffiti is a symbol of his defiance of his "gay family" dictating what his "positive gay identity" ought to be, and by extension his refusal to participate in the dominant gay habitus.

Fig. 5-2 –Michael Fahy, "Dumbass." *The Book of Boy Trouble*, 41.

Many of the "alternative gay ghetto" artists use autobiography to narrate the experience of "not fitting in" with dominant gay culture. Michael Fahy's autobiographical strips, for instance, depict the artist himself as a thin man with a receding hairline and glasses, an image at odds with the mainstream gay scene's physical ideals. Writing about his interactions with the gay scene – bad dates and alienating nights spent in bars – Fahy lampoons mainstream gay cultural norms, with a humorous and bitterly cynical edge.

In one strip – titled "Dumbass"[649] (**Fig. 5-2**) – Fahy confides that whenever he sees a handsome, athletic man – an "underwear model" type – "I just think 'Dumbass' automatically." The first panel depicts a gay "gym clone" in a tight tank top and shorts walking down the street in front of Fahy; he is placed in the foreground to the panel's right. The man looks not unlike many of the characters in the gay ghetto comics – he is blonde, toned, and wears a skimpy vest and athletic shorts. However, Fahy's deliberately naïve, slightly awkward drawing style uses a lot of scrappy cross-hatching and a rough-edged, inky line. The panel borders are rendered jaggedly and shakily. This style is evocative of woodcuts, and it feels odd to see such a "perfect"-looking man drawn in such an awkward, imperfect way. The gym clone's smile seems exaggerated and forced, and his strutting pose as drawn by Fahy seems awkward and preening, undercutting much of the character's allure. Fahy is drawn to the left of the panel, in the middle-background. Dressed in a more "indie" style and smoking a cigarette, he is rendered in the same heavily cross-hatched style, but looks more "at home" in the panel's mis-en-scene. His thought bubble reveals his assessment of the more conventionally good-looking man: "Probably can't spell."

Fahy then goes on to depict the kind of men that he is attracted to, and who find him attractive. These men tend to be bearded and bespectacled, and the strip's third panel depicts one of them lying in bed stroking his cat while asking Fahy to bring him his copy of William Faulkner's *A Light in August,* which

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[649] Michael Fahy, "Dumbass," *Boy Trouble* no. 4 (Fall 2000), ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (Seattle, WA: DK Press), np. Reprinted in Kirby and Kelly, *Book of Boy Trouble*, 41.

is "on the shelf with my woodcut supplies." The verbal and visual signifiers here humorously evoke an arty, literate and bohemian "alternative" gay subculture, composed of, as the caption above this panel describes, "a certain little sub-set of guys who read a lot, like obscure music, drink beer and own cats." The mention of woodcut supplies brings attention to Fahy's expressionistic drawing style too, which evokes avant-garde movements such as German Expressionism and artists such as George Grosz, who likewise caricatured urban life. It is also a style fairly typical of alternative comics more generally, and fits in with the loose description Cohn gives of "Independent American Visual Language" in comics, a style that seems " 'authentic' and idiosyncratic . . . in contrast to the mainstream styles of superhero comics" and that "often uses thicker lines and cartoony . . . figures."[650]

Fahy says he drew this strip in response to the "body fascism" of mainstream gay culture:

> Gay men really do have this pre-constructed sort of mode of how they should look shoved, you know, it's shoved down our throats really, like, "You're gonna take it and you're gonna like it," And who's coming up with this and why do we have to take it and like it? Can't we just be [laughs] normal? You can't be just be like a normal person? You have to be, like, toned and tanned and waxed and have your hair highlighted? And God forbid if you lose your hair! It's like all over, and if you're over 30, it's all over [laughs]. Like, why? Who says?[651]

Fahy admits that many of his representations of gay culture were motivated by anger and emotional turmoil, as well as a sense of alienation from gay culture. This feeling is shared by the majority of the "alternative gay ghetto cartoonists" I spoke to, and chimes with John Fiske's definition of resistance as a strategy of subordinated people in taking control of the meanings of their lives. He writes of the vital importance of "semiotic resistance that not only refuses

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[650] Cohn, *Visual Language*, 143.
[651] Michael Fahy, interview by author, tape recording, Philadelphia, 21st August 2008.

the dominant meanings but constructs oppositional ones that serve the interests of the subordinate."[652] Queer cartoonists responding to the gay ghetto genre can certainly be said to be involved in a sort of semiotic resistance that critiques or refuses the meanings and practices of the dominant gay habitus and creates alternatives. I will now turn to a discussion of the work of Robert Kirby, whose comics parody gay consumer culture and body fascism, while making the shy boys, queer punks, and misfits within the gay world his central protagonists.

Robert Kirby

I will first present an overview of Robert Kirby's career as a cartoonist, as well as a tastemaker in his role as editor of two important queer comics anthologies – *Strange Looking Exile* and *Boy Trouble* – before going on to analyse a range of his comics work to show the way he adapts and questions the conventions of the traditional gay ghetto comic strips. In discussing Kirby's role as editor as well as creator, I wish to show the ways in which his anthologies created a nurturing atmosphere for a new generation of like-minded cartoonists. Fahy, Leonard, and other "alternative gay ghetto" cartoonists cite Kirby's anthologies as important in providing a venue in which their work might be published, and also for showing that gay male alternative comics could be done by showcasing various examples of queer male cartoonists producing "different" narratives and representations.

Kirby was interested in LGBT comics throughout the 1980s, and familiar himself with the work of cartoonists like Howard Cruse, Alison Bechdel and Roberta Gregory. However, he did not start doing comics seriously himself until 1990, when he discovered the world of queer zines and the broader alternative comics scene. Inspired by the scrappy, punky comics of Nick Leonard, which he first encountered in the queer zine *Holy Titclamps* no. 5 (Summer 1990), Kirby self-published the first issue of *Strange Looking Exile (SLE)* in 1991.[653] Like the

[652] John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 10.
[653] Robert Kirby, interview by author, tape recording, Minneapolis, MN, 16th August 2008.

queer zines he encountered, *SLE* no. 1 cast a critical eye on contemporary gay culture. The editor and art-director of the Minneapolis-based gay newspaper *Equal Time* saw *SLE* and asked Kirby to create a new bi-weekly comic strip for the newspaper.[654] The first installment of Kirby's serial *Curbside* appeared in *Equal Time* in August 1991; after about a year he began self-syndicating the strip, offering it to other national gay and alternative newspapers.[655]

Across *SLE*'s five issues, published between 1991 and 1994, Kirby showcased work by a new generation of queer cartoonists including Nick Leonard and Diane DiMassa,[656] as well as more established figures such as Roberta Gregory and Alison Bechdel. Therefore, *SLE* provided a space for younger and older generations of queer cartoonists to see each other's work published and interact. *SLE* became a focal point both for the more established LGBT cartoonists, and for the newer queer cartoonists whose work was highly personal and often critical of gay assimilationism and conformity.

However, Kirby rejects the notion that he created a network for LGBT cartoonists: "I certainly didn't create it . . . I just kind of gave the new generation a kick in the ass."[657] Kirby cites the Lesbian Cartoonist Network and the book *Dyke Strippers* – a lesbian cartoonists' anthology – as important influences on his own efforts. However, Kirby did make a distinctive mark on the queer alternative comics field when he started the anthology zine *Boy Trouble* in 1994. *Boy Trouble* would become perhaps the most important queer anthology comic of the late 1990s and early 2000s in terms of establishing an arena and a network specifically for queer male alternative cartoonists. As Justin Hall describes in the introduction to the anthology *No Straight Lines*, Kirby's *Boy Trouble* "helped galvanize a new wave of gay male cartoonists . . . while also featuring more established creators."[658]

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[654] Ibid.
[655] All *Curbside* strips discussed in this chapter are from one two collections: Robert Kirby, *Curbside* (New York: Hobnob Press, 1998); Robert Kirby, *Curbside Boys: The New York Years* (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2002).
[656] DiMassa is renowned for her comic series *Hothead Paisan*, which lasted 21 issues, published from 1991-1996. They were collected in Diane DiMassa, *The Complete Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press: 1999).
[657] Kirby, interview.
[658] Justin Hall, ed., *No Straight Lines* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012), np.

Robert Kirby inaugurated *Boy Trouble* at a time when *Gay Comix* had gone on hiatus, while *Meatmen* focused overwhelmingly on pornography. The majority of the cartoonists published in *Meatmen* had been active since the 1970s and 1980s and their work seemed dated and clichéd to Kirby: "The *Meatmen* books just, they weren't offering anything, there was nothing in there that really spoke to the newer generation, I mean it was just a lot of hunky guys screwing each other, basically" as he puts it.[659] The Howard Cruse-edited run of *Gay Comix*[660] was a particular influence on what Robert Kirby wanted to do with *Boy Trouble*. But, at the same time, *Boy Trouble* was different from these older examples of gay cartooning too:

> I have nothing but respect and admiration for Howard [Cruse] but I wanted an update of that, 'cause that was already. . . I mean, if you look back and read [Cruse's] *Wendel* books, they're very '80s. They're the Reagan era. They captured that time really well, but we needed to archive other [periods and gay subcultures].[661]

Gay Comix was resuscitated in 1991 under the editorship of Andy Mangels. Mangels changed the title to *Gay Comics* as of no. 15, in order to appeal to a more mainstream comics market: "*Comix* with an 'x' in the title always denoted an underground comic series . . . I wanted to bring the series more into the 'mainstream,'"[662] as Mangels wrote in the twenty-fifth and final issue of the series. He was inspired by mainstream superhero comics, and under his helm such fantasy genres became more prevalent in *Gay Comics*, including his own gay superhero strip "The Sentinel" (later renamed "Pride"). "Andy Mangels' *Gay Comics* was just so obviously mainstream comics inspired," exhibiting as well a more mainstream gay sensibility, says Kirby, while "I was more inspired by the

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[659] Kirby, interview.
[660] Cruse edited *Gay Comix* from its first issue (1980) to no. 4 (1983); Triptow edited the series from no.5 (1984) to no. 12 (1988); 13th issue published in Summer 1991.
[661] Kirby, interview.
[662] Andy Mangels, "Editor's Notes," *Gay Comics* no. 25, Spring 1998, 40.

underground scene, by punks and upstarts and introverted alterna-people."[663] Robert Kirby and his editorial partner David Kelly continued to publish *Boy Trouble* semi-regularly into the twenty-first century with the fifth and final issue released in 2004.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss a range of Kirby's work, exploring the recurring themes of his oeuvre. Kirby's work takes up many of the conventions of gay ghetto comics – stories often involve a group of gay friends, are concerned with relationships and often set in gay environments. However, rather than being concerned with celebrating mainstream gay culture, Kirby's comics critique the dominant gay habitus. I will first discuss Kirby's story "Private Club,"[664] which though not written by Kirby himself, nevertheless typifies many of Kirby's own themes and concerns as a writer: it presents a range of "alternative" gay characters who are "outsiders" in contrast with both heterosexual and gay male culture, and represent an alternative set of identities, tastes and practices that contrast with those of the dominant gay habitus. I will then focus on different aspects of Kirby's alternative gay ghetto comics, discussing the way these comics parody and critique mainstream gay consumer culture and the dominant gay habitus; the ways in which they construct an alternative gay habitus, which relies on alternative, "subcultural capital" and references to punk and indie music and culture; and the ways in which Kirby's comics represent gay male sex, cruising, and body fascism, exploring the emotional dimensions of gay men's relationship with sex.

"Private Club" – Appropriating Space and Alternative Community

The story "Private Club" was adapted by Kirby from a short autobiographical prose story by Orland Outland. Although not written by Kirby himself, "Private Club" nevertheless typifies many of Kirby's own themes and concerns as a writer, and the kinds of alternative gay characters that populate his stories;

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[663] Robert Kirby, email communication with Sina Shamsavari, March 21st 2011.
[664] Robert Kirby, "Private Club" (adapted from a story by Orland Outland), *Strange Looking Exile* no. 5 (Winter 1994), ed. Robert Kirby (New Haven, CT: Giant Ass Publishing), 1-2.

hence I will discuss this story in more detail, in part to introduce these themes. "Private Club" also presents an alternative notion of community that contrasts with the traditional way that "community" is portrayed in the conventional gay ghetto comics, that is, in terms of a shared identity or essence. In the discussion that follows I will draw on Michel de Certeau's notion of the "tactics" of the subordinated, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's postmodern concept of community as "being-in-common," to demonstrate the way in which Kirby's "Private Club" present an alternative version of community.

The story "Private Club" is narrated by Orland himself. A middle-aged former punk, he reminisces about going to gay baths with his teenage friends in the early 1980s in Reno, Nevada. These teenage queers, too young to get into gay bars, would go to the baths not for sex but "for the music." Orland describes how a DJ in the baths at San Francisco was making tapes of "the best music in the world," which he would send to the club baths in Reno. The young protagonists of "Private Club" are portrayed as awkward and unsure of themselves, afraid of the highly sexually charged gay subculture, but also more focused on having fun with their friends and enjoying music. Kirby draws these characters and most of his narratives in a style that would be placed to the right of the x-axis of Scott McCloud's "Big Triangle of Style"; a cartoonish and slightly abstracted style as opposed to something more "realistic." The style Kirby deploys could be thought of as falling into what Witek describes as the "cartoon mode" and Cohn describes as "Barksian" visual language: his characters often have slightly exaggerated features – especially noses – and sometimes move in an exaggeratedly "rubbery" way. This style feels very apt for portraying Kirby's central protagonists, many of whom are portrayed as awkward, goofy, or shy.

Throughout the strip the narrator's alienation from "mainstream" gay scenes is highlighted. He and his friends are rejected by the majority of the gay men who frequented the baths in his hometown in Reno, Nevada. As the narration in the strip puts it: "No one at the baths would sleep with us – they were clones, they were men." The young punks themselves reject this rejection, emphasizing their difference from the other gay men, and turning their difference into a badge of honour: "We were faggots, and proud of it, long before anybody invented queers." In one panel, Kirby depicts Orland and his friends

dancing and singing along to "T.V.O.D." by synth-punk act The Normal, while a muscular and moustachioed gay man peers from behind a wall in the baths, annoyed at being interrupted while cruising and having sex (**Fig. 5-3**). This man is drawn by Kirby in basically the same style as his protagonists. But perhaps he is less broadly caricatured, with the "goofy" stylization reigned in to show

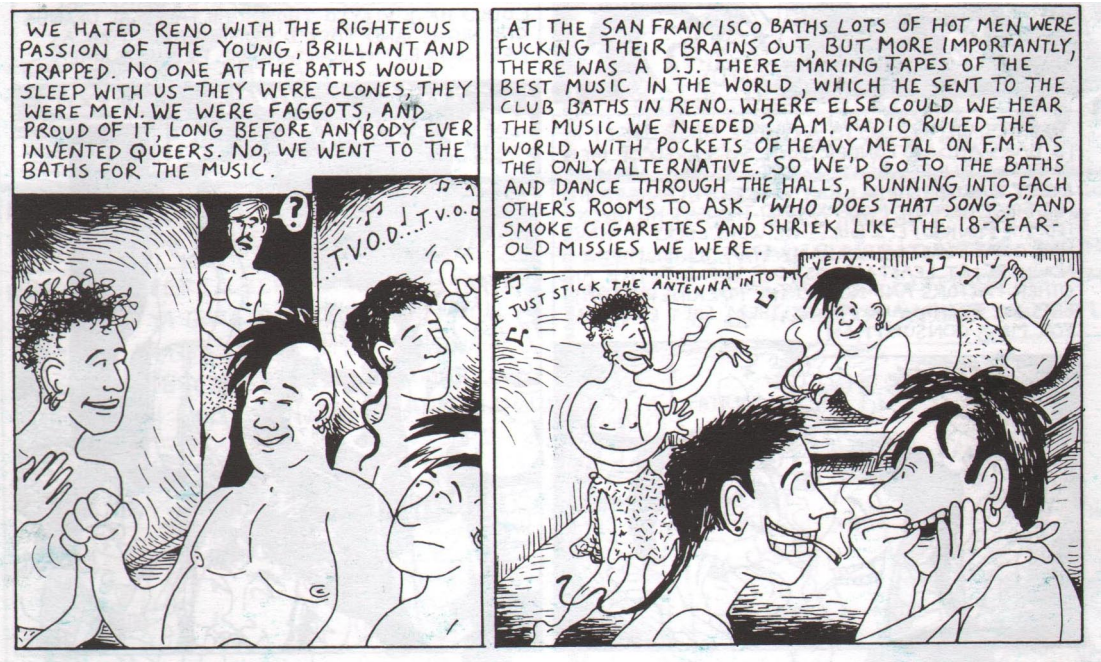

Fig. 5-3 – Robert Kirby, "Private Club." *SLE* no. 5, 1 (Excerpt.)

him as the young "faggots" see him – more serious and distant, and more "masculine."

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau attempts to outline the way individuals unconsciously navigate the everyday. De Certeau distinguishes between "strategies" and "tactics." He links the former with institutions and structures of power who are the "producers." He sees individuals as "consumers" acting in environments defined by strategies by using "tactics." To illustrate this definition of "the tactic," de Certeau introduces us to *la perruque*, or "the wig," which he describes as "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer."[665] Nothing of material value is stolen, and

[665] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London, Berkeley and LA, California: University of California Press, 1984), 25.

as de Certeau writes, *la perruque*

> differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room.[666]

La perruque illustrates de Certeau's argument that everyday life works by a process of poaching on the territory of others, using the rules and products that already exist in culture in a way that is influenced, but never wholly determined, by those rules and products.

Like de Certeau's secretary's "tactical" use of time, the young faggots of Kirby's strip use the *space* of the gay baths for something the institution does not intend, transforming parts of it into their own "private club" – as the story's title implies. This is a private space, albeit in semi-public, where these teenage punks have the freedom to be themselves, listen to their favourite punk/synth-rock music, "smoke cigarettes, and shriek like the 18-year-old missies we were." By appropriating space in this way, the young faggots create for themselves a different kind of "community" - an alternative reality.

This alternative reality is one that contrasts with the young punks' repressive and heteronormative surroundings in Reno. In one panel, Orland and his friends are depicted standing on a street corner, delighting in singing the lyrics of post-punk band The Delta 5's "Mind Your Own Business" loudly in an effort to frighten heterosexual passers-by (**Fig. 5-4**). This is another example of de Certeauian "poaching."

However the young faggots also enjoy disrupting the "normal," everyday rules of the game at the gay baths, "poaching" on the territory staked out by the sexually confident "clones" – the club's primary clientele. This disruption is manifested through their sloppy, "punk" appearance and their decidedly

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[666] Ibid.

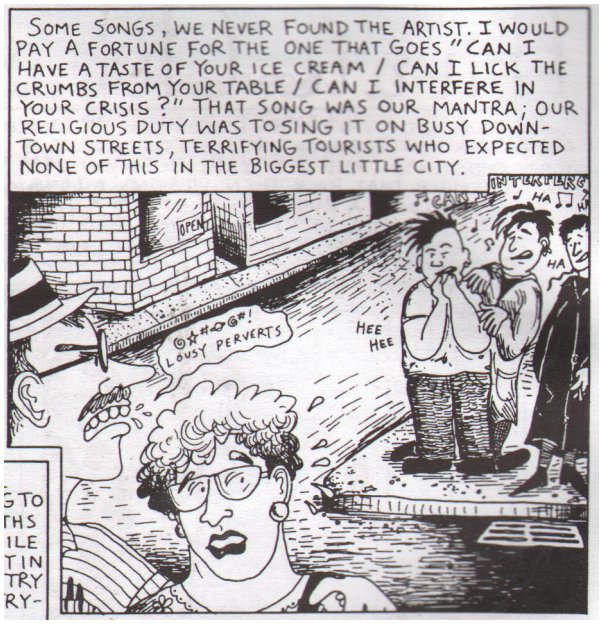

Fig. 5-4 - "Robert Kirby, "Private Club." *SLE* no. 5, 2 (Excerpt.)

unsculpted bodies (**Fig. 5-5**), which contrast with the more groomed and "worked-out" looks of the "clones." A further disruption of the bath's status quo is the young faggots' ebullient enjoyment of "unusual" punk music and their playfully effeminate "camping," which contrasts with the more "serious" and "masculine" postures adopted by the majority of the bath's visitors.

The strip's protagonist, Orland, describes the baths as "our secret world" of "punk fags in the middle of nowhere," and distinguishes his friends from the "gay clones." The story closes in the present day, with Orland visiting Club Uranus, a gay punk rock club in San Francisco (**Fig. 5-6**). Orland notes that though, in theory, he should have loved this club, in fact he experiences it as a sanitized and commercialized version of the less official space he had "poached" and shared with his friends.

Kirby portrays Club Uranus as populated by handsome athletic gay men sporting fashionable tight T-shirts, spiky haircuts and trendy piercings, while discussing their accessories ("*Love* the earrings"/"Thanks – got 'em on sale"). Their wide smiles make these characters seem false and dishonest, while their exaggeratedly large teeth make them appear hungry, rapacious and almost carnivorous. Although officially more beautiful and fashionable, the way these characters are caricatured underscores their vacuity. The narrative caption reiterates that in contrast to the "private club" of Orland's youth, commercial

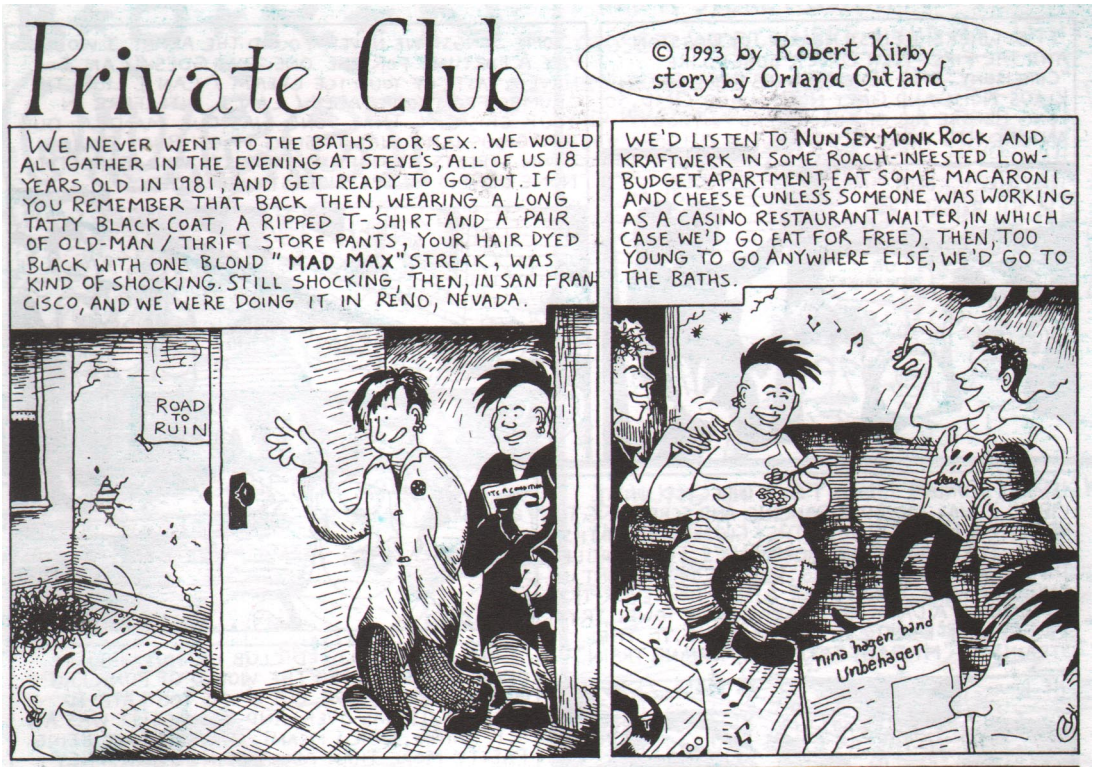

Fig. 5-5 - Robert Kirby, "Private Club." *SLE* no. 5, 1 (Excerpt.)

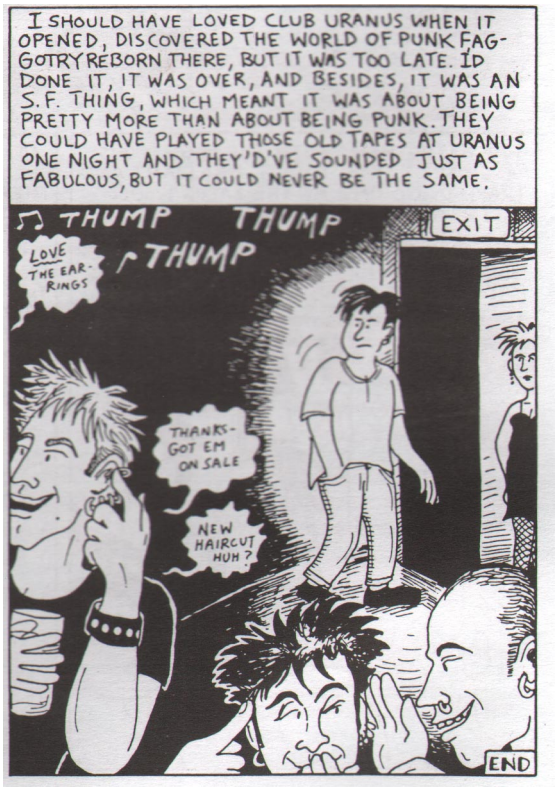

Fig. 5-6 - Robert Kirby, "Private Club." *SLE* no. 5, 2 (Excerpt.)

"punk" clubs are "about being pretty more than about being punk." San Franciscan queer punks are represented simply as another kind of gay "clone"; another conformist gay identity predicated on consumerism. As we will see in the next section of this chapter, this critique of consumer culture is a recurring theme in Kirby's ongoing strip *Curbside*.

In our interview, Kirby described himself as, at one time, feeling like "a square peg surrounded by many round holes."[667] This is how he represents Orland – alienated not only from the gay mainstream "clones," but also from the gay punk scene that he "should" feel part of. Like many of Kirby's comics, the story emphasizes the tensions and conflicts inherent in the traditional notion of community, but also suggests that a kind of postmodern experience of community is possible and indeed valuable. The strip emphasizes the importance of Orland's teenage bonds with his punk faggot friends. In some ways, and for a necessarily brief time, this friendship group – Orland's "private club" – does operate as a community where the young punks' difference from their heteronormative small town and from the norms of gay culture can be celebrated and enjoyed.

Orland's small cluster of friends is by no means an "LGBT community" in the traditional sense, and perhaps not even a "gay punk community." They are, rather, a group of close friends, bound together as outsiders but not solely by their sexual identity or even their taste in music and fashion. Orland's group of friends perhaps constitute an example of Jean-Luc Nancy's postmodern notion of community as "being-in-common," which Nancy distinguishes from the more traditional notion of community as a common essence, identity or goal. The thinking of community as essence is for Nancy "the closure of the political,"[668] because "it assigns to community a common being", an "absor[ption] into a common substance."[669] However, for Nancy, community is something quite different, a "being-in-common" that has nothing to do with "communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be

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[667] Kirby, interview.
[668] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxviii.
[669] Ibid.

exposed."[670] Community as being-in-common, on the other hand, is the ongoing *experience* and activity of interrelation, and is characterised by boundaries and terminations, "a sharing which is never completed."[671] It may last only for a brief time and in a bounded space, such as the "poached" territory of the gay baths in this story.

Many familiar elements of gay alternative cartoonists' representation of mainstream gay culture are present in "Private Club." "Mainstream" gay men are represented as vacuous, body fascist, and conformist; they are akin to the types of gay characters prominent in the gay ghetto strips, but in "Private Bath" they are background characters and figures of mockery, in contrast with the punky young faggots who are the story's protagonists. In terms of aesthetics, too, Kirby's drawing style underscores the rebellious nature of his characters, contrasting with the aesthetics of the mainstream gay ghetto comics. In this early phase of his work, Kirby's art is relatively spontaneous and unpolished, contrasting with the more accomplished craftsmanship of many of the older, more established gay cartoonists. While I would not argue that care and craftsmanship necessarily equal conservatism or conformity, certainly the freshness and spontaneity of Kirby's drawing style, the expressive cross-hatching, and the use of black and white rather than smooth glossy colour all bespeak an edgy and do-it-yourself attitude in the art that corresponds to the punky, oppositional attitudes of Kirby's protagonists within the narrative. When mainstream gay men appear at the end of "Private Club," they are portrayed not as idealized and aspirational figures but, as I have discussed, caricatured as somewhat grotesque, in contrast to Orland's punky friends. The young protagonists' "punk" gay identities are also posited as an alternative to mainstream gay identity; characters like them (re)appear as protagonists throughout Kirby's oeuvre, and can also be found in the work of many gay alternative cartoonists, such as Fahy and Leonard.

It should also be pointed out that in Outland and Kirby's story the contrast between the "young faggots" and the "gay clones" is not absolutely

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[670] Ibid.
[671] Linnell Secomb, "Fractured Community," *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 141.

dualistic. There is a suggestion that the older gay clones hold a sexual allure for the younger gay characters, albeit complicated by fear and an awareness of difference. In some ways, the young punks' desire to disrupt the older men's activities is a form of attention-seeking. Importantly though, this is done not by trying to *be like* the mainstream group, but by exaggerating and dramatizing the *difference* between the two groups.

Many of the elements in Kirby's story "Private Club" recur throughout his work, and can also be found in the work of artists already discussed such as Nick Leonard and Michael Fahy. The three main elements are: critiques of gay consumer culture; the representation of an alternative gay habitus through displays of subcultural capital; and most especially, a range of inter-related issues within male gay culture: sex, cruising, "body fascism," and conventional standards of male beauty. Over the next three sections of this chapter I will discuss each of these key elements in more depth.

Resisting Gay Consumer Culture

Kirby's comics critique the dominant gay habitus and mainstream gay culture in various ways, and are often directly critical of gay consumer culture and the notion of "expressing" one's sexual identity through consuming commercial products. In this section I discuss examples from Kirby's ongoing strip *Curbside*, which show Kirby's overt critiques of gay consumer culture.

In a number of Kirby's stories, he critiques and parodies gay consumer culture, poking fun at gay media's attempts to encourage a sense of communal gay identity through consumerism. One *Curbside* installment titled "New products from the Shocking Mauve catalogue"[672] (**Fig. 5-7**) parodies products from the *Shocking Gray* catalogue, aimed at LGBT people, which uses the rhetoric of "politics" and "pride" to sell overpriced knick-knacks. In the panels of this strip Kirby depicts inanely grinning models displaying various overpriced products, all of which have co-opted the signifiers of gay identity politics, providing ironic commentary in the captions. The "Pink Triangle End

[672] Robert Kirby, "New products from the Shocking Mauve catalogue," *Curbside*, np.

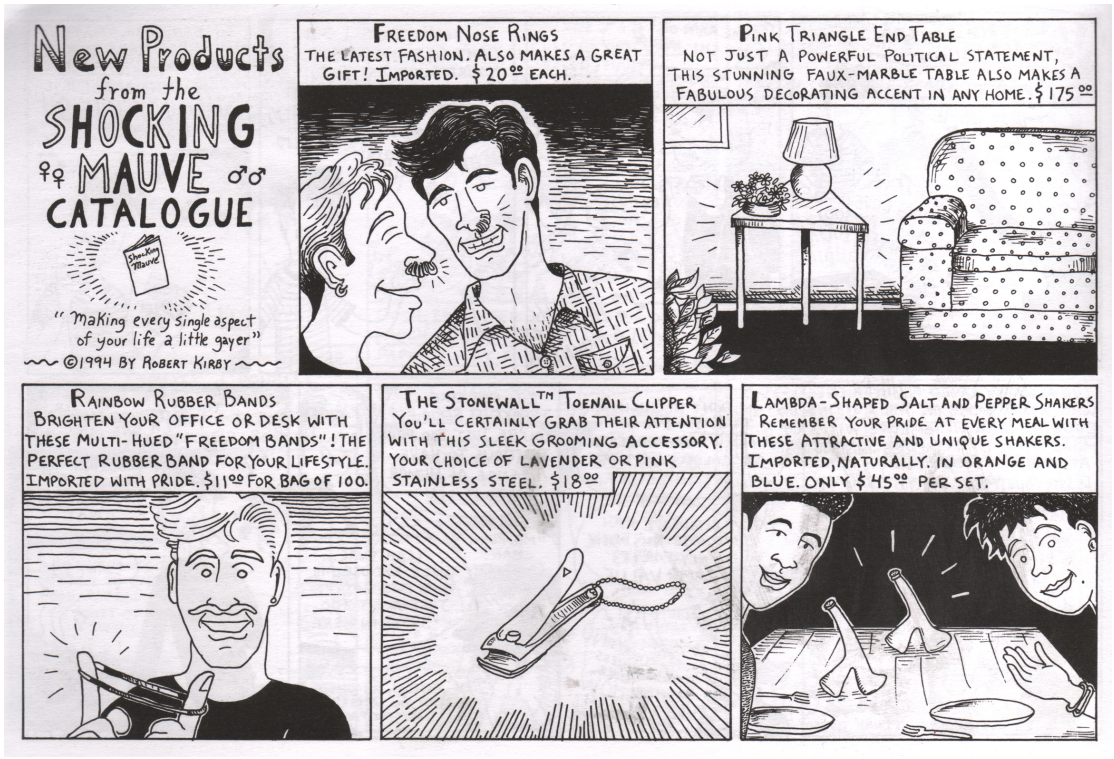

Fig. 5-7 – Robert Kirby, "New Products from the Shocking Mauve Catalogue." *Curbside*, np.

Table" is "not just a powerful political statement" but also "a fabulous decorating accent in any home," and the "Stonewall™ Toenail Clipper" actually trademarks the riots that inaugurated Gay Liberation. The portrayal of these objects through black-and-white drawings rather than glossy colour photographs underscores the difference between mainstream consumer culture and a punky, alternative and DIY approach. Moreover, by mimicking the hyperbolic language of marketing and advertising, Kirby points out the way that even products as banal as rubber bands and toenail clippers can be – and often are – yoked to identity politics and exploited by consumer capitalism.

In another *Curbside* strip (**Fig. 5-8**),[673] Kirby parodies openly gay bodybuilders Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris, who were at that time being promoted as an "A-list" gay couple with products like *Duo*, an expensive coffee-table book of soft-core photographs by Herb Ritts, marketed at gay men.[674]

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[673] Robert Kirby, "Introducing Duet," *Curbside*, np.
[674] Herb Ritts, *Duo: Herb Ritts Photographs Bob Paris & Rod Jackson*, (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 1991).

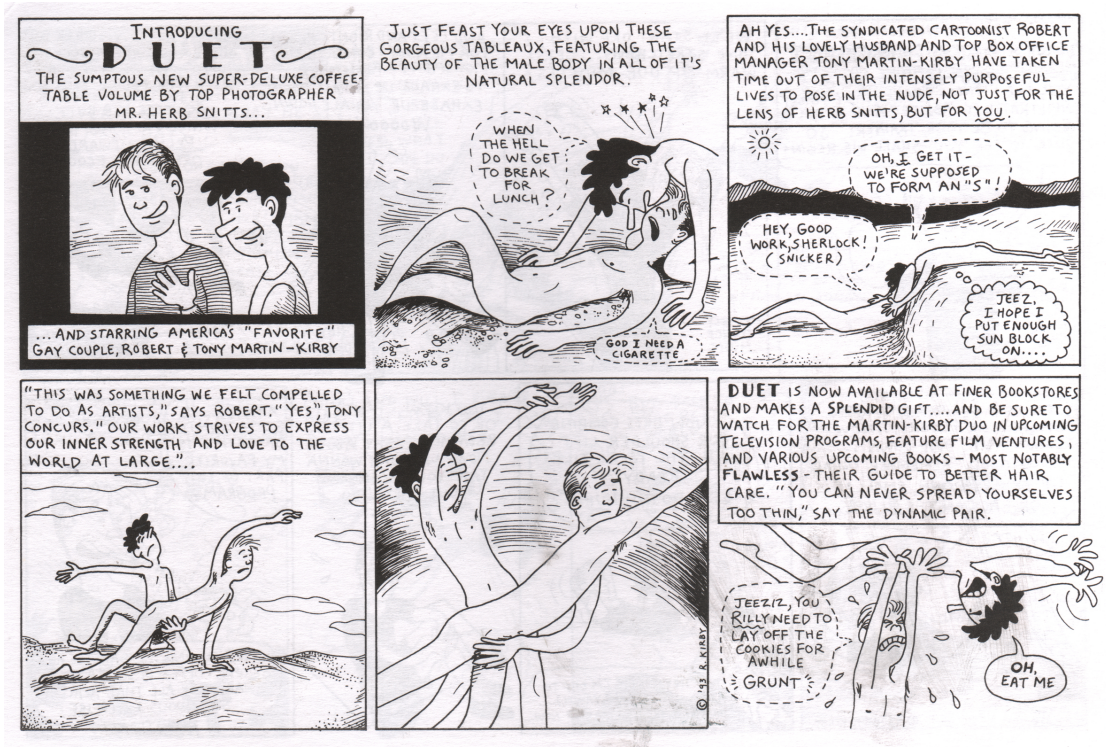

Fig. 5-8 – Robert Kirby, "Introducing *Duet*." *Curbside*, np.

Kirby here critiques targeting gay men as a consumer group, the way many products aimed at gays reproduce stereotypical images of gay male bodies as pristinely sculpted, and promoting rather dubious "gay role models." Kirby's strip is a faux-advert for "Duet," a coffee-table book starring Kirby and his own boyfriend at the time, Tony, recreating Bob and Rod's "gorgeous tableaux, featuring the beauty of the male body in all its natural splendor." Of course Rob and Toby's bodies are far from the idealized forms of Bob and Rod. They are also drawn in the cartoonish "big-foot" style, rather than in the more sexualized "realistic" styles associated with erotic gay illustration. Moreover, the hyperbole of their statements in the "voiceover" captions ("America's 'favorite' gay couple") contrasts with their whispered complaints within each panel and emphasizes the *imperfection* of actual human bodies and relationships: Rob gets a neck cramp while posing, while Tony, lifting Rob, whines, "You *rilly* need to lay off the cookies for a while!"

As Kirby puts it,

> If you read *The Advocate* and *Instinct* only and *Genre* magazine you'd think gays were just this like real monocultural sect of people, that listened to *this* music and did *this* sort of thing and dressed *this* way, and we're just not. It's a media creation, and a lot of people follow that and they want to. They follow what they're supposed to look like, listen to, act like, whatever. But many other people don't, and I just write about the people like me who don't try to follow those guidelines.[675]

Many of Kirby's comics, then, focus on such "people . . . who don't try to follow those guidelines." As discussed in Chapter Four, many of the more conventional gay ghetto comics tend to include an array of references to mainstream gay consumer culture in order to create a sense of place – as they depict characters who are more or less "at home" in contemporary urban gay enclaves. In the mainstream gay ghetto comics, such consumer products are depicted fairly neutrally as a "fact of gay life"; less often, as in Joe Phillips' "Club Survival 101," the comic strip in fact serves as an advertisement for a product (a gay clothing line, in that particular example). In contrast, alternative gay ghetto comics like the ones by Robert Kirby discussed in this section, as well as Nick Leonard's strip "Little Homer Sexual and His Long-Suffering Gay Parents," discussed earlier, pointedly and sometimes savagely parody gay consumer culture and the dominant gay habitus. Alongside this critique of mainstream gay consumer culture and taste, as we will see in the next section, alternative gay ghetto comics posit an "alternative gay habitus" through a display of subcultural capital.

Subcultural Capital and an Alternative Gay Habitus

The traditional gay ghetto comics work to construct a visible and "typical" gayness through a variety of codes and signifiers, including fashion, locations, body types, and so on. Robert Kirby, like other alternative cartoonists, also builds up a sense of the lives and identities of his characters through cultural

[675] Kirby, interview.

references, albeit to a different set of cultural figures and products. In this section I will discuss how, particularly in his ongoing strip *Curbside*, Kirby draws on forms of what Sarah Thornton has called "subcultural capital,"[676] particularly related to a broad punk/indie sensibility, in order to construct an alternative gay habitus in his comics.

In the work of many of the "alternative gay ghetto" cartoonists, a broad "indie" sensibility is indicated through the clothing and hairstyles of certain characters, who are shown wearing band T-shirts, ripped or frayed denim jeans and sporting spiked or dishevelled hair, rather than the brands and fashionable looks favoured by the mainstream metropolitan gay scene. Instead of the

Fig. 5-9 – Robert Kirby, "Too Close." *Curbside*, np (Excerpt).

references to Madonna, Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer that abound in strips like *Poppers* and *Chelsea Boys*, the characters in *Curbside*, as well as in comics by Leonard, Fahy, Piotrowski, and others, tend to make references to the broad spectrum of alternative music, and often to openly queer or queer-coded performers. So, for example, characters are shown listening to music by indie bands like the Magnetic Fields, fronted by openly gay Stephin Merritt, and

[676] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 11-14.

lesbian punk band Team Dresch. Drew is shown wearing Smiths T-shirts, and Nathan has a poster of the Smiths' former front-man Morrissey on his wall (**Fig. 5-9**) – while not openly declaring himself as gay or bisexual, many of Morrissey's lyrics include oblique references to queer culture and he is presumed queer or at least considered something of a sexually ambiguous icon by at least some of his queer fans.[677]

Other cartoonists I interviewed also underlined the importance of music – and often, indeed, Morrissey and The Smiths, in particular to their lives and their sense of themselves as "alternative" gay people. Tim Piotrowski explains:

> As with any group, . . . if you don't have similar interests, you tend to run up against this wall of getting to know the people better or getting to a certain level of friendship, because if you don't like the same music you're not gonna go to the same shows, or the same clubs, or the same stores to shop and everything, so what're you gonna do? Sit there and stare at each other and say "I like Madonna," "I like Morrissey," which I always love to use as a comparison because they're like sort of the iconic M's . . .[678]

The opposition that Piotrowski makes, between Madonna as shorthand for commercial, mainstream gay-identified music tastes and Morrissey as shorthand for alternative/indie – but still gay or queer-identified - music tastes, is emblematic – even paradigmatic – of the way alternative gay comics tend to define themselves oppositionally, as standing *against* commercial and conformist gay culture as much as *for* non-commercial and non-conformist alternative gay culture. The references to indie or alternative bands and performers serve as displays of "subcultural capital" – Sarah Thornton's term, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, for the kinds of "alternative," often "anti-commercial" kinds of taste patterns and knowledges deployed by subcultural participants. Such displays of subcultural capital serve as a way of

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[677] For a discussion of Morrissey's ambiguously "queer" image, see Richard Smith, *Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Music* (London: Cassell, 1995), 64-68.
[678] Tim Piotrowski, interview by author, tape recording, New York, August 2008.

communicating and making links with like-minded queer individuals through a sort of "secret language" of references to certain kinds of "alternative" popular culture and, significantly, *not* others.

As Kirby puts it, "Morrissey was part of that 90s, late 80s, early 90s, there was a certain kinda person that really responded to that music and I just was one of them."[679] Nathan and Drew, the central protagonists of *Curbside*, are two different examples of the "certain kinda person" that Kirby refers to; "certain kinds" of gay men who are shown to be *different* from the majority of characters depicted in the mainstream gay ghetto strips, *not* participating in a dominant gay habitus:

> In my work, I very rarely talk about "the gay community" or "the gay this," "the gay that," [my characters are] just people, you know, . . . my political act was to make [the characters' sexual identity] absolutely secondary to everything else, their humanity was the most important thing . . . And so many other cartoonists still talk about this gay shit and gay this and gay that and I guess . . . I just want . . . gay people to just be people. . .[680]

It may be countered that in referring to "subcultural" gay or queer knowledge of obscure "alternative" performers and artists, Kirby and other "alternative gay ghetto" cartoonists are drawing on discourses that maintain and reinforce hierarchical divisions, indulging in a kind of "inverse snobbery." However, it must be noted that – like the "officially gay" consumer products previously discussed – certain popular performers such as Madonna, Donna Summer, Barbra Streisand, and so on are so often and repetitively referenced in and promoted by mainstream gay media that they have become stereotypical signifiers of a commodified gay identity.[681] They have become what you are

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[679] Kirby, interview.
[680] Ibid.
[681] Obviously these specific performers were especially referenced in gay media in the 1970s and, in Madonna's case, from the 1980s through the 1990s; different commercial music performers tend to be referenced more often now.

expected to like if you are gay; symbols of an individual's participation and assimilation in a dominant gay habitus. Kirby, like other "alternative gay ghetto" cartoonists, then, deliberately chooses to reference indie and alternative musicians (as well as more obscure or avant-garde artists and writers), displaying "subcultural capital" in their comics as a way of challenging and undermining dominant gay cultural norms, and positing instead an "alternative" gay habitus.

Sex, Beauty and "Body Fascism"

Kirby's comics often deal with a range of inter-related issues within male gay culture: sex, cruising, "body fascism," and conventional standards of male beauty. In this section, I mainly focus on Kirby's *Curbside Boys: The New York Years*.[682] I discuss how Kirby portrays cruising and sex not simply as "fun" but as emotionally complicated, emphasizing the emotional dimensions of sex; critiques gay body fascism and presents a greater range of male bodies as potentially desirable; and avoids stereotypical representations of asexual "shy nerds" versus sexually successful "hot boys" through his portrayal of the relationship between the skinny and under-confident Drew, and the more conventionally attractive and confident Nathan.

In gay ghetto comics such as *Poppers*, *Chelsea Boys*, *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast* and *Troy*, many of the characters tend to epitomize, in drawn form, the kinds of "gym clones" often seen in glossy gay lifestyle magazines. In contrast, in the alternative queer comics, cartoonists tend to include a greater variety of different body types. In *Curbside Boys*, Nathan is portrayed as reasonably athletic but not hyper-muscled, and Drew is portrayed as underweight, and under-confident about his looks. However, he is shown to be attractive to various men in the comic, and his self-doubts are represented as problems that he struggles with and tries to find solutions for, rather than

[682] All strips discussed in depth in this section are taken from Kirby's second *Curbside* collection, *Curbside Boys: The New York Years*. See Figure titles for page references.

simply being played for laughs as they arguably are with Yves in *Poppers* and *Chelsea Boys*' Nathan.

The inclusion of a number of skinny, average, and overweight men in the alternative gay ghetto comics is an implicit critique of the hegemony of the muscled gay male "clone" body. Indeed, they are not simply included, but are the protagonists and the focus of the stories. Moreover, not only do the artists include a greater variety of body types, but they often also pointedly and explicitly critique the dominance of a very specific and rigid type of male beauty in gay culture.

Fig. 5-10 – Robert Kirby, "Drew Steps Out." *Curbside Boys: The New York Years*, 10.

Kirby addresses the issues of the complexity of gay men's relationships with these notions of beauty, sex, and confidence, in a number of his comics, particularly through the character of Drew. A range of strips discussed in this section and focusing on Drew's emotions and perceptions can be understood as constituting an archive of Drew's queer feelings, in Cvetkovich's sense. Cvetkovich argues that archiving difficult emotions can serve "as the foundation

for the formation of public cultures."[683] Certainly, Kirby's exploration of Drew's feelings about his body, himself, and his relationship with sex can be seen as opening up a space in queer male culture – potentially - for more honest exploration and dialogue about these issues.

In the six-panel strip "Drew Steps Out" (**Fig. 5-10**), Drew is shown attempting to overcome his insecurity by going to a gay bar. The first panel depicts a gay bar filled with fashionable, attractive, and muscular men posing confidently, immersed in conversation or locked in passionate embraces – and all of them ignoring Drew. This is Drew's subjective perception of the space he finds himself in.

Drew himself is drawn by Kirby in the panel's foreground, but slightly to the left of the panel's centre – as if he has been jostled from "centre-stage" by one of the more confident and popular men at the bar. To his right, a man with pierced ears and big biceps is laughing with friends, oblivious to Drew's presence. Drew's own thoughts are communicated in narrative captions throughout this strip. The first one, hanging above this scene of social awkwardness, reads: "I'm not like all of you." Like many protagonists in gay alternative comics, Drew distinguishes himself as decidedly different from "most other" gay men.

The second panel of the strip presents a medium close-up of Drew's head and shoulders in the foreground. His beer bottle is raised to his lips as if he has about to take a swig, his lips are curled down and his eyes are narrowed in scorn, as he looks over his shoulder or off to one side. Behind him, we see two bar patrons making eye contact with each other. One is smiling hopefully, the other pointing at him and smiling, a cigarette in his mouth. Neither, of course, notice Drew.

While the background characters are drawn as if clearly illuminated, Drew is drawn in deep black shadow, as if he is back-lit, making Drew look like a reversed photo negative, and underscoring the negative emotions he is experiencing, which are communicated to us in the narrative captions again:

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[683] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 10.

"Things are never glib and easy for me. Always I speak the truth, no matter what." Drew represents himself as authentic and "real," even when it is difficult or painful, in contrast to the "fake," inauthentic and crass gay culture he is surrounded by.

The third panel shows Drew, again in the foreground, looking around the club and observing the patrons, in particular a square-jawed hairy-chested hunk with an adoring guy draped all over him. Drew's inner monologue continues, self-righteous and self-pitying in equal measure, cataloguing his physical imperfections: "I wear big nerdy glasses, I'm skinny and have bad posture. There's a thin scar on my left knee and a mole on my ass." Though these features make Drew "not pretty," they are nevertheless recounted in detail, almost as a list of the things that make Drew "real" rather than simply "pretty."

The following panel's caption is longer and more filled with words than any of the previous ones, emphasizing the intensity of Drew's thoughts and feelings: "But so what," he continues, "I'm smarter than the lot of you together." Drew derides the gay bar patrons' conversations about trendy designer underwear and campy TV shows, while issuing a silent challenge to these men: "Talk to *me* about Burroughs or Genet instead. Something *real*." While this inner monologue sounds very confident, even arrogant, Kirby plays the image in the panel against these words, showing us the character's vulnerability through a close-up of Drew's face – a sad, dejected look in his eyes, the spots and stars floating around his face traditional cartooning icons called "emanata"[684] indicating drunkenness or dizziness. The smaller caption box in the same panel emphasizes this, too; the superior arrogant tone of the preceding sentence ("Talk to *me* about . . . something *real*") is contrasted with the needy vulnerability of the next: "Just talk to me somebody. Notice me. I have pretty green eyes…"

In the final two panels of the strip, Drew starts to head home, resolving in the penultimate panel to stop going to bars, but acknowledging that his desire for intimacy nevertheless means that he will be in such an alienating

[684] Witek, "Comics Modes," 29.

situation again, and soon: "Until next week boys…" reads the final panel's caption, while the drawing in the panel shows Drew taking one last look over his shoulder at the bar crowd as he exits. As in the strip's first panel, Drew is drawn slightly off-centre and his slightly slouching, unconfident and skinny physicality is again contrasted with the bar's other patrons. A muscular man with close-cropped hair strikes a campy pose with a cigarette in his hand to the left of the panel. To the right, two shirtless, sweating men, arms draped over each other, leave the bar together. Unlike Drew, these men are socially confident and sexually successful – "fish in water"[685] as Bourdieu might have it.

Drew is described by other characters and thinks of himself as "shy," a word which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, is related to "shame"[686] – and she contends "that at least for certain ('queer') people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity."[687] Drew can certainly be seen as one of these queer people, and in this sense he shares much in common with the protagonists of Jon Macy's *Fearful Hunter* (which is the focus of Chapter Six) and with the central characters of both Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* and David Kelly's *Steven's Comics* (which I will discuss in Chapter Seven). As Sedgwick points out, however, feelings of shame are available for "the work of metamorphosis, reframing, [and] refiguration,"[688] and in a later strip – "Bull's-Eye" (**Fig. 5-11**) – Drew is shown in a gay bar, once again negotiating his feelings of shame or shyness. Again, Kirby uses Drew to critique gay norms, but this time from a much more empowered perspective.

The first tier of the two-tier strip is divided into four panels and provides a "panoramic" view of the gay bar. Effectively, we are invited to see the bar with its "pretty boys, all in a row" from Drew's point of view; again we have privileged knowledge of his interior monologue. He has decided that he will "make it happen" tonight with a man he is attracted to, but also that he will be pragmatic: instead of the more obviously "pretty boys" at the bar, Drew focuses his attention on Larry, a middle-aged man, slightly heavier with a receding

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[685] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 127.
[686] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.
[687] Ibid., 64.
[688] Ibid., 63.

hairline. “You’re the one for me,” Drew thinks to himself (echoing the title of Morrissey song “You’re The One For Me, Fatty”). As Drew puts it: “You look uncomfortable, like you feel you don’t belong here. I can relate. I can love someone like you, for one night anyway.” Kirby here breaks with more well-

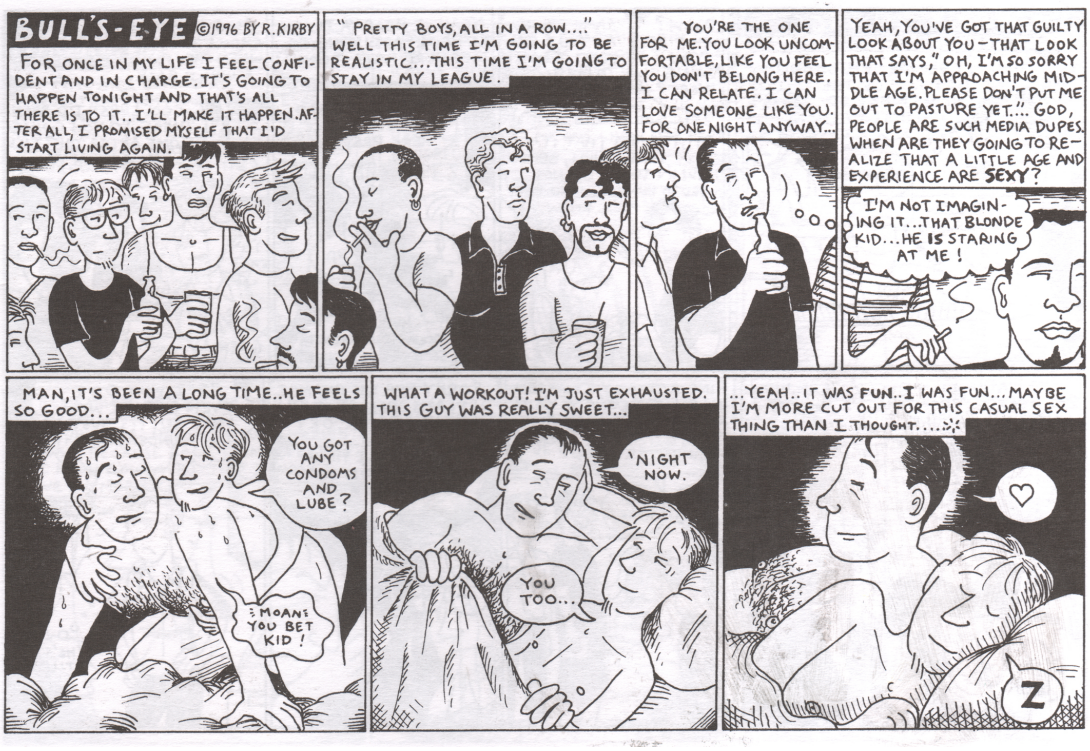

Fig. 5-11 - Robert Kirby, “Bull’s-Eye.” *Curbside Boys: The New York Years*, 20.

trodden depictions of gay cruising as simply being about physical satisfaction, and as involving only young and conventionally “beautiful” bodies. Even though it may only be “for one night,” it is important to Drew that he feels a connection with the person he’s having sex with. Rather than valorising confidence or arrogance as exciting, Drew instead eroticizes the older man’s discomfort, lack of confidence, and shame.

Larry’s shame and vulnerability are represented as appealing in part because these very shameful, vulnerable feelings are something Drew understands and can empathize with. Moreover Drew finds it exciting that the man is older than him: “God, people are such media dupes. When are they going to realize that a little age and experience are *sexy*?” Drew – and Kirby – here again critique gay culture, specifically the tendency in gay media to focus almost

exclusively on youth as a mark of desirability while ignoring older men as decidedly unattractive. As Drew observes, such stereotypical notions are often internalized by gay men themselves: "You've got that guilty look about you – that look that says, 'Oh, I'm so sorry I'm approaching middle age – please don't put me out to pasture yet'".

Drew and Larry go home together and have sex. Their sexual encounter is one example of a tendency in Kirby's strips to portray a greater range of gay male bodies, and ages, as attractive and desirable. In the autobiographical story "At Seventeen" for instance, Kirby depicts himself as a young man not caring about the age of the guys he was sleeping with, while the slim and youthful protagonist of another (semi-autobiographical) strip tells the story of a "bearish type" he was having hot casual sex with for a while.

In some ways, Drew is similar to the "unattractive," "nerdy," shy characters of the gay ghetto comic strips – Yves in *Poppers*, for example, and Nathan in *Chelsea Boys*. However, unlike these characters, who are rarely shown in sexual situations, Kirby allows Drew a reasonably active sex life, especially once he and Nathan become physically involved. Drew may not be entirely comfortable with having lots of casual sex but, especially when he is with a partner, he is shown to "come out of his shell," and to "own" and enjoy his sexuality more confidently.

Kirby further explores gay men's relationship with beauty and body fascism in a strip, titled "Too Cute" (**Fig. 5-12**), narrated again by Drew. The narrative caption in the first panel tells us that the scene depicted therein takes place "years ago." An adolescent Drew (slouching, bespectacled and wearing a B-52's T-shirt) is shown walking down a city street, his gaze drawn toward the man coming towards him. Fashionably coiffured and wearing a tight T-shirt that shows off his sculpted pecs and abs, the man is coded as a mainstream gay "clone." In contrast with Drew's slouch, this man walks confidently, upright with his head held obliviously high.

In the following panel, the handsome stranger walks "off-screen" while Drew is depicted staring back at him from behind. "Snotty prick doesn't even look at me" reads his thought balloon, while simultaneously a miniature Drew is shown springing out of a heart-emblazoned box, which itself is bursting out of

the "real" Drew's chest, calling out "Yoo hoo!" at the handsome but oblivious clone. The thought balloon and Drew's resentful expression tell us part of the story – his resentment at being ignored and his rationalization that the man is "arrogant" – while Drew's emotional reaction – a passionate, desperate desire to be noticed by the handsome stranger – tells us the rest. The adult Drew's narrative caption elaborates on the younger Drew's complex relationship with beauty: "I noticed it, I craved it, but hated it at the same time. You know what I'm talking about."

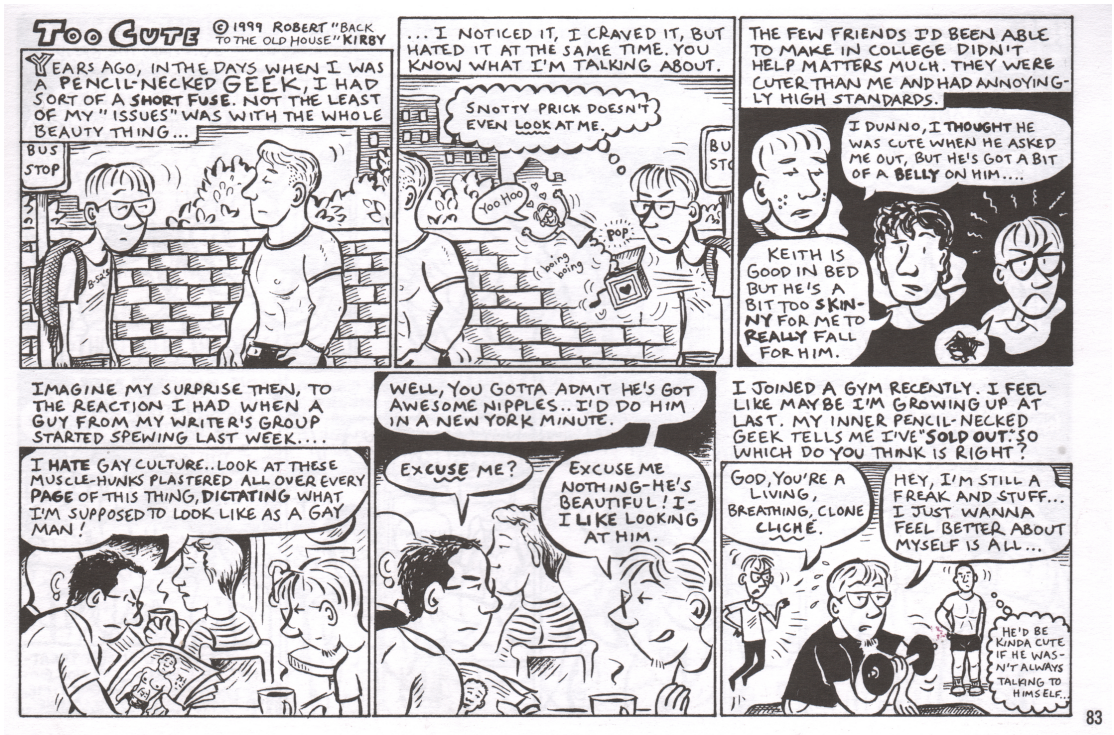

Fig. 5-12 - Robert Kirby, "Too Cute." *Curbside Boys: The New York Years,* 83.

In the third panel, Kirby depicts Drew's college friends who were "cuter than me and had annoyingly high standards" as, literally, "talking heads." A blond twink declares, "I dunno, I *thought* he was cute when he asked me out, but he's got a bit of a *belly* on him," while a dark-haired boy talks about a lover who is "good in bed but . . . a bit too *skinny* for me to *really* fall for." The third head in the panel – Drew's own – is radiating with jagged lines signifying his anger, and his word balloon contains an irate scrawl censoring his real feelings about his friends' attitudes. Through Drew, Kirby here critiques the prevalence

of body fascism within gay male culture. The young men depicted in this panel do have, as Drew puts it, "annoyingly" – and unrealistically – high standards, rejecting men they find attractive or sexually satisfying simply because of slight physical imperfections that mean they do not match up to the "flawless" ideals of male beauty circulating within mainstream gay media (including comic strips).

However, Kirby does not simply present a critique of body fascism, but also complicates this critique. In the strip's fourth panel, we are in the present day, and Drew is having coffee with a man from the writing group he attends, who is flicking through a gay magazine. "I *hate* gay culture," blusters the man, "Look at these muscle-hunks plastered over every *page* of this thing, *dictating* what I'm supposed to look like as a gay man!" Drew surprises himself with his own response: "He's beautiful! I – I *like* looking at him." Kirby's critique of body fascism and his complication of this critique can be seen in view of Sedgwick's notion of reparative readings and practices. Sedgwick draws on the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's concept of positions – the schizoid/paranoid position and the depressive position – to discuss "paranoid and reparative . . . practices."[689] Sedgwick explains that for Klein's infant or adult, the paranoid/schizoid position is, understandably, "marked by hatred, envy and anxiety" – many of the emotions Drew experiences at the beginning of the strip – and is "a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects" that surround one.[690] The depressive position, also called the reparative position, is "an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting."[691] Sedgwick contends that much academic writing and criticism is paranoid/schizoid, tending to split objects into "good" or "bad." She recommends reparative critical practices that are more open, empathetic, and able to understand the complexity of a given situation.

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[689] Ibid., 128.
[690] Ibid.
[691] Ibid.

The final panel depicts Drew doing arm curls at his local gym. His "inner pencil-necked geek" – depicted as a miniature Drew hovering above his shoulder – berates him for "selling out" while the "real" Drew counters: "I'm still a freak and stuff . . . I just wanna feel better about myself is all . . ." By including this "turn-about" in Drew's attitude to beauty mid-way through the six-panel strip, Kirby does not disqualify legitimate critiques of body fascism. As discussed, throughout his comics Kirby portrays a range of different men as desirable, and represents gay men with more rigid attitudes to beauty as narrow-minded "media dupes." Nevertheless, Kirby underlines the complexities of this situation by having Drew acknowledge his own attraction to (conventional) beauty without subscribing to "body fascism" himself. Throughout his comics – and especially through the character of Drew – Kirby is interested in depicting both alienation and, as he puts it, "the question of alienation."[692] Kirby resolutely challenges mainstream gay stereotypes and opens up space for identities and narratives excluded from mainstream gay culture. At the same time, he avoids creating a binaristic situation of "authentic" and alienated victim-heroes versus "inauthentic" and oppressive "villains." In this strip, then, Drew seems to move from a paranoid/schizoid position to a depressive, reparative position. Kirby's work, too, can be seen as a reparative practice in Sedgwick's sense, in its openness to seeing and portraying complexity.

An open, empathetic, complex and reparative mode of understanding comes into play in *Curbside* through Kirby's depiction of Drew's developing relationship with Nathan. When they first meet as roommates in the story "First Impressions," Drew is decidedly cold toward Nathan. In one of the last stories in the collection, Drew memorializes his relationship with Nathan, which has by now fallen apart: "When I first met him I said to myself, 'This boy has never had a single regret in his entire life'". Kirby explains,

> That was Drew's perception, because Drew was so stuck in his own alienation. He meets this handsome young man and he magnified his

[692] Kirby, interview.

> own alienation to the point where nobody else would experience it but him, especially not this handsome young man, Nathan, who's never had a day's pain in his life. Well that's of course obviously not true. . . . a guy like Drew is gonna see what he perceives to be a golden boy, and just resent him right away. I think that speaks to a lot of people.[693]

Kirby uses Drew and Nathan's developing relationship to subvert and break down stereotypical depictions of gay male "types," and once again to cultivate openness and empathy – what Sedgwick might describe as a "reparative impulse"[694] – and to challenge black-and-white, either/or logic. Drew's growing self-confidence by the end of the storyline prevents him from being stuck in the role of the "geeky unattractive guy" typified by *Poppers*' Yves or *Chelsea Boys*' Nathan. Similarly, as we get to know *Curbside*'s Nathan – who Drew initially sees as cute but shallow, not unlike *Poppers*' Billy or *Chelsea Boys*' Sky – we see him as a much more multi-faceted character than the more stereotypical "hot boys" of the gay ghetto comics.

Two consecutive strips – "Everywhere that I'm not" (**Fig. 5-13**) and "View of Drew" (**Fig. 5-14**) – reveal a more complex picture of both Nathan's and Drew's perceptions of themselves and one another. Together, they tell the story of one night in both Drew's and Nathan's life, from multiple perspectives, with Kirby playing verbal and visual elements – narrative captions and images – against each other, a strategy that plays on what Charles Hatfield describes as one of the defining tensions of comics reading.[695] In "Everywhere that I'm not," the narrative captions reveal Drew's perspective on Nathan, while the drawn panels for the most part depict Nathan's experiences cruising and having sex in the men's room of a gay bar. In the strip's first panel, Drew asks Nathan if he wants to watch the British gay teen romance film *Beautiful Thing* with him. Nathan is shown adjusting his tousled hair in a hand-mirror, and as Drew puts it

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[693] Ibid.
[694] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.
[695] Hatfield, *Alternative*, 36-41.

in the following panel's narrative caption, "it's not too tough to figure out where he's off to tonight, damn it."

From Drew's perspective, Nathan is "so beautiful, he shouldn't have too much trouble" picking up a guy. Indeed, the third panel seems to confirm this: Nathan is not short of male attention, eyeing up one dark-haired man over his shoulder on the left of the panel while a blond moves in on him from the right. The fourth panel shows Nathan and the blond man kissing passionately against a tiled wall, which connotes they are in a public toilet. Indeed, Nathan's thought balloon confirms this: "In the men's room?! Oh well, I'll try any place once!"

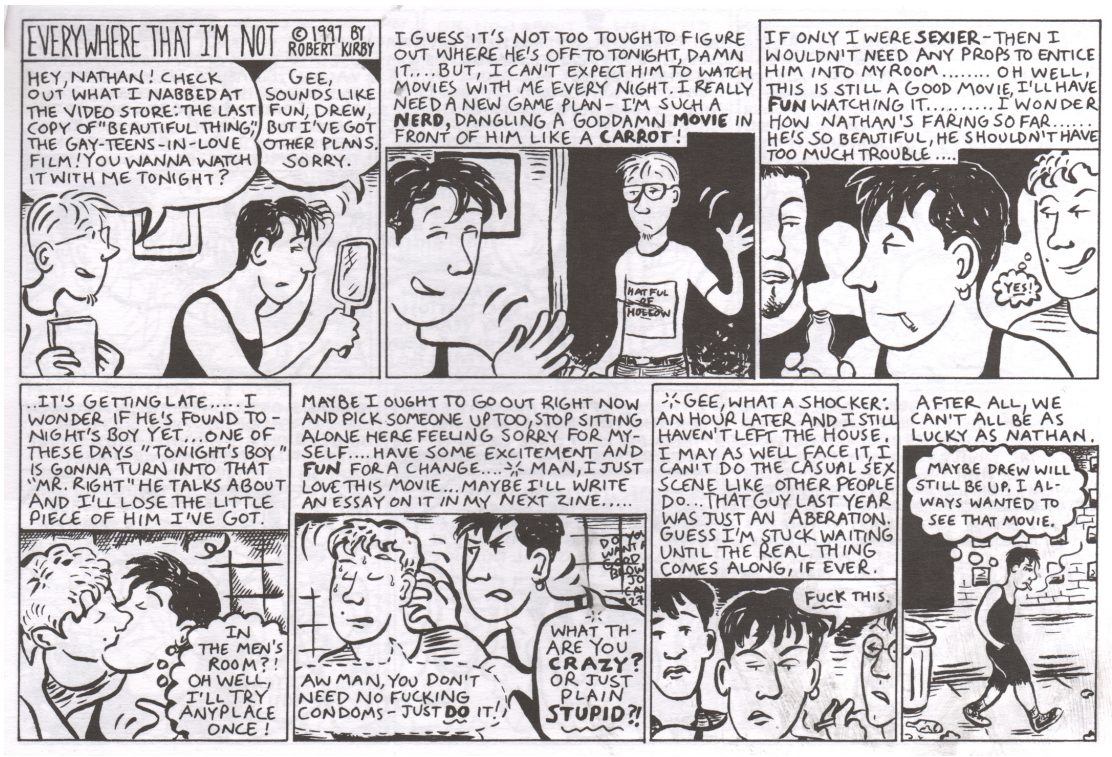

Fig. 5-13 - Robert Kirby, "Everywhere That I'm Not." *Curbside Boys: The New York Years,* 40.

The fact that he hasn't had sex in a men's room before suggests that Nathan might not be quite as sexually adventurous as Drew presumes. Meanwhile, in Drew's narrative caption in this panel, he wonders if Nathan has found "tonight's boy yet," and worries that if he doesn't make a move on Nathan himself soon, he will lose "the little piece of him I've got."

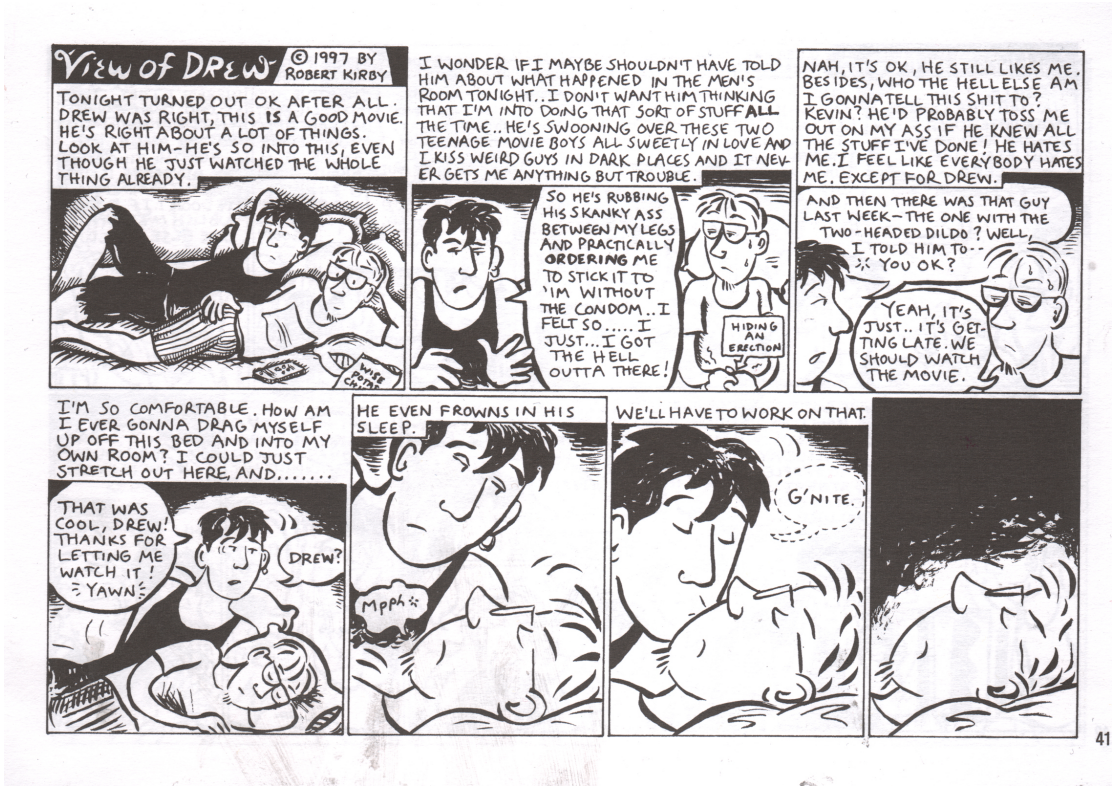

Fig. 5-14 - Robert Kirby, "View of Drew." *Curbside Boys: The New York Years,* 41.

In the fifth panel, Drew wonders if he should go cruising himself, "have some excitement and fun for a change." Here, Kirby exploits the verbal/visual tension of comics by undercutting Drew's fantasy of the fun time Nathan is having through the image in this panel. The blonde guy is urging Nathan to fuck him without a condom, but Nathan is outraged. The sixth and seventh panels show Nathan leaving the bar and walking home desultorily, an ironic counterpoint to Drew's caption: "We can't all be as lucky as Nathan."

In the following strip, "View of Drew," Kirby switches the narration in the captions to Nathan's point of view. After returning home from the bar, Nathan has ended up watching British gay film *Beautiful Thing* with Drew, after feeling uncertain over having told Drew what happened to him that night. He has clearly started to care what Drew thinks of him. "He's swooning over these two teenage movie boys all sweetly in love" thinks Nathan, "and I kiss weird guys in dark places and it never gets me anything but trouble." Nathan here idealizes Drew as sweetly romantic. But we are privy to the fact that while Nathan was telling Drew about his encounter that night, Drew was actually aroused by the story and hiding his erection, with Kirby humorously using a

smaller caption and an arrow pointing to Drew's lap, to point this out. Again, Kirby complicates the depiction of Nathan as happy-go-lucky stud and Drew as asexual nerd. The strip ends with Drew falling asleep, and Nathan giving him a kiss goodbye on the cheek. In the next strip, Nathan and Drew's relationship becomes physical, and the rest of the strips collected as *Curbside Boys* chronicle their relationship from its passionate beginnings through the problems that threaten its stability – misunderstandings, differences, infidelities – and ultimately undermine it.

Kirby's approach to sexuality contrasts with mainstream gay cultural discourses that insist on the primacy of sex and of pornographic representations for a strong and assertive gay identity. This insistence is what Michelangelo Signorile in *Life Outside* has called the "cult of masculinity."[696] He also subverts the emphasis in gay male culture on the idealized and muscular male body by portraying men with a greater variety of body types as sexually desirable and desiring. Kirby does include sexual depictions, but explores the varied and contradictory feelings around sex, intimacy, beauty and body image experienced by many gay men, treating these issues in a more serious and more complex way than in many of the traditional gay ghetto comics.

Conclusion

In portraying the contradictions and complexities of emotions, pains and pleasures in the lives gay male "outsiders," cartoonists like Kirby avoid creating narratives which primarily function as propaganda for an official "gay lifestyle" or dominant gay habitus. Indeed, comics by Kirby and other "alternative gay ghetto" cartoonists do not dictate what a "positive" gay identity or lifestyle is, or ought to be. Rather, through the lives of the characters they represent, cartoonists like Robert Kirby, Michael Fahy, Nick Leonard, and others can be seen as presenting a critique of the dominant gay habitus and positing an alternative habitus. They open up a space for the discussion of the contradictions and ambiguities experienced by gay men in their lives; and

[696] Signorile, *Life Outside*, 60.

create a more complex depiction that allows for painful, unsatisfying or disappointing stories about gay identity, community, and sex, as well as affirmational, exciting or liberating stories, to be told. In the following chapter, I discuss the work of those cartoonists who deal with similar themes, but work with – and against – the conventions of the gay *porno* comics genre, focusing especially on the comics of Jon Macy.

Chapter Six: Alternative Gay Porno Comics - Werewolves, Druids and Gods

This chapter focuses on what I call "alternative gay porno comics." These comics by Second- and Third Wave cartoonists respond to the conventions of the gay porno comics genre which, as discussed in Chapter Three, is one of the two dominant generic paradigms of the field of gay male comics production.

In this chapter, I focus on the work of queer cartoonists whose comics take up aspects of the porn genre's conventions – explicit sex, idealized bodies, and the intention to arouse – but aim to do something different with the genre. This is not to argue that they depart completely from the tropes of the older gay porno comics genre. Alternative porno cartoonists often cite these older artists as influences. Steve MacIsaac, for instance, says that he works "with *and* against Tom of Finland."[697] Indeed, the same could be said for many of the alternative gay porno cartoonists. The discourse of leather, for example, is prevalent in many of the alternative *and* mainstream porno comics. However, in stories like Justin Hall's "Barcelona Booty"[698] sex scenes in leather clubs are not represented as seamless, successful pornographic scenarios, but include moments of awkwardness and frustration.

There are other ways in which the alternative gay porno comics do not fully depart from the tropes of the older gay porno comics: for example, the majority of bodies represented in these comics do not tend to be *that* different from the muscular and athletic bodies portrayed in traditional gay porno comics. That said, there are differences, and in some of the alternative porno comics, especially the stories set in the "real world," more ordinary bodies are sometimes portrayed.

The majority of alternative gay porno comics are also similar to most traditional ones in style. Most of them stay close to some sense of "realism" in the drawing styles employed, and could be placed to the left of the x-axis of

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[697] Steve MacIsaac, interview with author, tape recording, Los Angeles, CA, 31st July 2008.
[698] Justin Hall, "Barcelona Booty", *Hard to Swallow* no. 2 (San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA: Marginalized Publications/All Thumbs Press, Fall 2006), 33-38.

McCloud's Big Triangle of Style. This is certainly the case with artists like Jon Macy, Steve MacIsaac, and Justin Hall. However, some, like BiL Sherman and Dave Davenport, do also veer right toward a stylized cartooniness as well as slightly upward into abstraction.

Overall, I argue that alternative gay porno comics subvert the conventions of the mainstream gay porno comics genre by placing explicit sexual scenarios into more complex emotional narratives. The characters in the majority of the mainstream gay porno comics are "flat" characters – very much "types" with little personality beyond serving the needs of pornographic narratives The characters in the alternative gay porno comics discussed are more "rounded" and fleshed-out, and we learn more about their relationships and desires, rather than simply watch them in a range of sexual scenarios.

Some of these stories are set in the contemporary, "real" world while others are set in fantastic, otherworldly realms or involve supernatural beings or phenomena. But, whether "realistic" or "fantastical," I argue that these pornographic narratives open up a world of complex human emotions, sexual identities and interrelationships. In emphasizing the emotional dimensions of sex, these alternative porno comics also open up and explore similar territory to the other comics discussed in this thesis, questioning more conventional notions of gay identity and community, as well as binaristic notions of gender and sexuality.

Alternative gay comics contrast, then, with the pornotopias of the majority of gay porn comics, which are usually all-male worlds such as army barracks, locker-rooms and leather dungeons. There, sex is represented purely as a matter of spectacular, visual pleasure; something to be watched and relatively straightforwardly enjoyed, rather than a complex force with the potential to impact on other areas of life and identity.

These comics also question normative notions of gender and sexuality as binaristic, unitary and stable. This may involve focusing on characters who find that their sexual identities, desires and practices do not always line up neatly. In the more "realistic" pornographic comics, such as those by Justin Hall or Steve MacIsaac, this may be a matter of representing characters with more polysexual

desires or identities. In the more "fantastic" porno narratives, bodies themselves are represented as hybrid, fluid and unstable.

The kinds of supernatural imagery and tropes used in some of these comics – for example in the work of Jon Macy, Dave Davenport and Brad Rader – is a distinctive departure from the cops, sportsmen and other tropes and character types used in the older gay porno comics.. Bodies in the more traditional gay porno comics of Tom, Etienne and so on, remain the same and are often so extremely similar to one another as to constitute what Ramakers calls "prototypes." [699] In contrast, bodies in the comics of Macy, Davenport and Rader go through various shifts and transformations.

The comics of Jon Macy are the main focus of this chapter. Macy's intertwining of explicit sex with an emotional love story in his recent series *Fearful Hunter*, as well as his questioning of normative notions of gender, sexuality and community throughout his erotic oeuvre, marks him as a particularly interesting artist who adapts the traditional conventions of gay porno comics in order to tell more emotionally complex stories. Macy's comics career began in 1990, marking him as a Second Wave queer cartoonist, but despite taking a hiatus from comics between 2000 and 2008, he has had the longest career of all the alternative queer cartoonists discussed in this chapter, and remains an important creative force within the field of LGBT comics.

Before going on to discuss Macy's comics in depth, I first discuss the range of alternative gay porno comics and the different ways in which Second- and Third Wave artists respond to the conventions established by erotic cartoonists of the pre-Stonewall and First Waves. In the section titled "Everyday Sex," I discuss the work of cartoonists Steve MacIsaac and Justin Hall, who set their pornographic narratives in the "real world," to show how they present scenes of sex as part of "ordinary" everyday life. In "Supernatural Sex," I examine the work of Brad Rader, BiL Sherman and Dave Davenport, to demonstrate how they blend the tropes of pornography with those of the fantastic and the supernatural, using the latter as a metaphor for exploring questions of identity, community and sex. I then present a short biography of

[699] Ramakers, *Dirty Pictures*, 57.

Jon Macy before going on to discuss the three key ways in which his comics adapt and challenge the conventions of the gay porno comics genre.

Everyday Sex

Some alternative queer cartoonists respond to the conventions of gay pornography by telling stories of sex set in the "everyday," contemporary "real world." Steve MacIsaac's series *Shirtlifter*, for example, includes stories that take up the conventions of gay porno comics – explicit sex and idealized bodies – but in the context of complex stories of human interaction and relationships, where situations prompt characters to reflect on identity and sexuality. The story "Unpacking" for example, serialized in *Shirtlifter*, explores the developing relationship between Matt, an openly gay man, and Connor, a man who views

Fig. 6-1 – Steve MacIsaac, "Unpacking." *Shirtlifter* no. 3, 40-41.

himself as heterosexual and holds many homophobic and gender-normative opinions.[700] One scene from "Unpacking" (**Fig. 6-1**) begins by showing a sexual act explicitly, according to the conventions of pornography, but then departs from – and disrupts – these conventions by depicting Matt and Connor's rather combative discussion about the fact that Connor is married to a woman, and refuses to identify as gay or bisexual.

Another important cartoonist, Justin Hall, explores similar territory in his series of erotic comics that tell the true stories of the private sex lives of people who work in the sex industry. These stories were serialized in the four issues of the erotic anthology *Hard to Swallow* between 2006 and 2008.[701] While some of these stories are autobiographical, in the main they are based on interviews Hall has done with friends and acquaintances whose jobs mean that they have public sexual personae – mainly escorts and pornographic performers.[702]

Hall's "true sex" stories share some similarities with the gay porno comics genre, mainly in the sense that graphic sex is shown, and the stories are intended to be sexy. However, there are differences. A somewhat broader range of body types and ethnicities tends to be depicted, and sexual desire is often portrayed as surprisingly fluid. In one story, in fact titled "Fluid,"[703] Hall tells the story of "Bang Bang," who describes herself currently as a "femme dyke in a committed relationship," but who, a decade ago, used to dress as a boy and have sex with gay men in sex clubs. Through doing biographical work, Hall tells a range of stories that show the variations of queer sexuality, troubling binaristic notions of sexual desire and identification.

In Neil Cohn's analysis of the visual language of American comics, he notes that alternative or independent comics artists employ a kind of visual

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[700] Steve MacIsaac, "Unpacking," *Shirtlifter* no. 3 (Los Angeles: Drawn, Out Press, 2008), 1-16, 25-44, 65-88.
[701] Justin Hall and Dave Davenport, eds., *Hard to Swallow* no. 1-4 (San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA: Marginalized Publications/All Thumbs Press, Spring 2006-Fall 2008).
[702] Justin Hall, interview with author, tape recording, San Francisco, California, July 18th 2008.
[703] Justin Hall, "Fluid", *Hard to Swallow* no. 3 (San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA: Marginalized Publications/All Thumbs Press, Fall 2007), 27-30.

language he labels the "Indy" dialect.[704] However as Cohn notes, there is not one single consistent Indy dialect, but several. MacIsaac's and Hall's drawing styles fit Cohn's "second thread of the Indy dialect" best. This thread is associated with "serious" narratives. Its common features include "simple, yet straightforwardly

Fig. 6-2 – Justin Hall, "Fluid." *Hard to Swallow* no. 3, 28-29.

realistic drawings," in which figures usually "retain proportions close to realistic bodies, even accentuating the plainness of people."[705] Cohn notes that these drawings are the antithesis of what he calls the "Kirbyan American Visual Language" – strongly associated with mainstream superhero comics – in which bodies are idealized to look "like athletes and models."[706] A similar point could be made, of course, about gay porno comics. In both MacIsaac's and Hall's erotic

[704] Cohn, *Visual Language*, 143.
[705] Ibid.
[706] Ibid., 141.

comics there is a tension between idealizing bodies and portraying them in "ordinary" or "naturalistic" ways.

Although MacIsaac's drawing style is not strictly photorealist, he does use photographic reference for his drawings, sometimes taking his own photographs of men, including himself, and drawing figures based on them.[707] MacIsaac's work in *Shirtlifter* operates in what Witek has called the "naturalistic mode,"[708] as discussed in Chapter Four. The bodies of MacIsaac's central characters in "Unpacking" are muscular, in line with the athletic bodies seen most often in gay porno comics. However, the faces of his characters are not necessarily those of idealized male models. Furthermore, the other characters in the story are drawn with a range of body and facial types that are often "ordinary" or "plain." Hall's drawing style can also be considered as "naturalistic." He does not use photographic reference as extensively or consistently as MacIsaac. Nevertheless, the faces and bodies he draws tend to retain "realistic" or mimetic proportions and avoid excessively "cartoony" abstraction. In the "true sex" stories such as "Fluid" (**Fig. 6-2**), he tends to depict his characters with more "ordinary" or "average" bodies.

Because Hall's and MacIsaac's stories are either based on real sexual experiences, or at least intended to seem naturalistic, they tend not to simply depict seamless and successful pornographic sex. Instead, they show moments of awkwardness and disruption in sex and relationships. They use sex to expose the vulnerabilities and depict the humanity of their subjects. This exploration of identity, humanity and vulnerability through sex is also the territory of the other main group of alternative gay porno comics artists, whose work I discuss in the next section. In contrast with Hall and MacIsaac, these artists explore such themes in combination with surreal and supernatural settings and motifs.

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[707] Steve MacIsaac, interview.
[708] Witek, "Comics Modes," 31-34.

Supernatural Sex

Along with Jon Macy, the cartoonists Brad Rader, BiL Sherman and Dave Davenport have been some of the main artists of the Second- and Third Waves to blend the tropes of pornography, the fantastic, and the supernatural, and they have done so in very different ways. In this section, I show how these cartoonists often use supernatural tropes as a metaphor for exploring questions of identity, community and sex.

Dave Davenport's trio of recurring erotic protagonists – Feral, the Ghost Skater, and Doug – have appeared throughout the four issues of *Hard To*

Fig. 6-3 – Dave Davenport, "Feral: John I'm Only Dancing." *Hard To Swallow* no. 4, 10.

Swallow and one issue of *Feral and the Ghost Skater*.[709] Feral is a man named Grant, who transforms into a werewolf whenever he is sexually aroused. Mitch, the Ghost Skater, is the spirit of a dead skate-punk. And Doug (nicknamed "Digit") is a punk go-go dancer who was Mitch's lover while he was alive. The trio are in an open, three-way relationship, all having sex with one another as well as others over the storyline; they are also part of a queer punk scene based on Davenport's own experiences in subcultures.[710] The stories deal with more serious subjects like gay-bashing and date rape among gay men, albeit in a playful way. For example, in one story[711] Grant, in human form, is drugged and then raped by a man he meets in a bar. The rape is portrayed erotically on the first panel of one scene in the story; in line with pornographic tropes, both men's athletic bodies are rendered sensuously and penetration is shown explicitly (**Fig 6-3**). However, Grant wakes up. The date-rape drug having aroused him, he transforms into Feral, taking "revenge" on his attacker by animalistically rimming him.

The playfulness of Davenport's narratives is reflected in his drawing style, too, which may be placed roughly halfway along the x-axis of McCloud's Triangle, between what Witek calls "naturalistic" and "cartoon" modes. For example, in the rape scene described above, Grant's and the rapist's bodies are drawn in a way that retains more-or-less realistic proportions, but their faces are more schematized. For example, their eyes are rendered in a "cartoony" way as simple dots. When Grant transforms into Feral, Davenport's drawing becomes even more "cartoony" and stylized. The wolf-man's physique, cock, fur and so on are all drawn in a more playfully exaggerated manner.

Brad Rader's graphic novel *Harry and Dickless Tom*[712] also uses fantasy, but takes a much darker tone than Davenport's comics. It tells the story of two friends: married, homophobic, heterosexual truck drivers, Tom Manley and Harry Studman. Tom and Harry have sex with gay men while "on the road" but

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[709] Dave Davenport, *Feral and the Ghost Skater* No. 1 (Los Angeles, CA: Marginalized Publications, Spring 2011).
[710] Dave Davenport, interview with author, tape recording, Los Angeles, California, July 31st 2008.
[711] Dave Davenport, "Feral: John I'm Only Dancing", *Hard to Swallow* no. 4 (San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA: Marginalized Publications/All Thumbs Press, Fall 2008), 1-14.
[712] Brad Rader, *Harry and Dickless Tom* (Los Angeles, CA: Flaming Artist Press, 2006).

Fig. 6-4 – Brad Rader, *Harry and Dickless Tom*, 20.

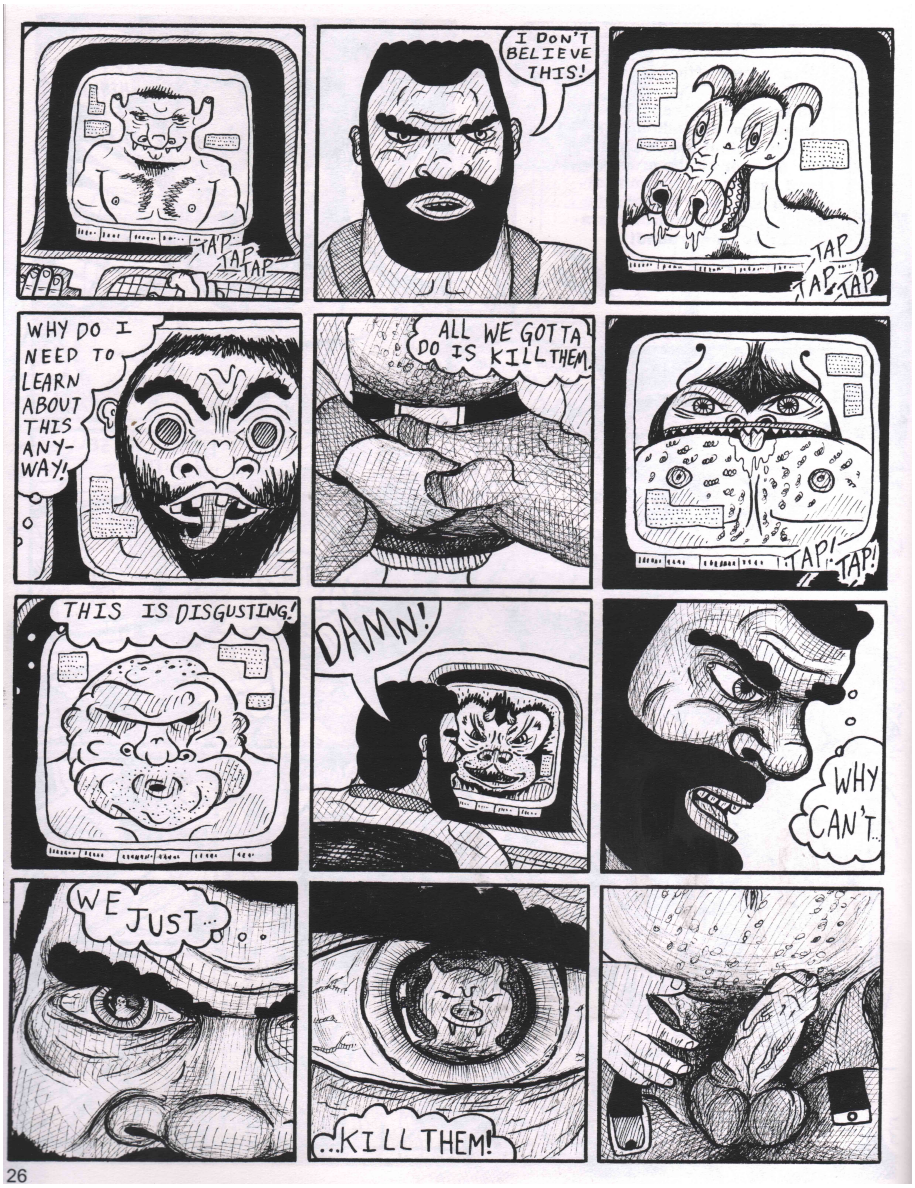

Fig 6-5 – BiL Sherman, "Monster War," *Wanky Comics* No. 2, 26.

also violently abuse them. One morning Tom wakes up to find that his penis has been replaced with a vagina, a "punishment" from the "Cunt Goddess" who seeks to teach him a lesson for his rigid ideas about masculinity. Each chapter of *Harry and Dickless Tom* is drawn in a completely different style from the history of comics to suit the chapter's mood and tone. The first chapter, for example, is drawn in a pastiche of the *ligne claire* (French for "clear line") style pioneered by Hergé, the Belgian creator of *Tintin* (**Fig. 6-4**). *Harry and Dickless Tom* examines fears around sex, gender, and identity, aggressively questioning conformity to normative gender and sexual roles.

BiL Sherman, too, uses various fantasy tropes in his series *Wanky*. The story "Monster War"[713] follows the adventures of the Captain of a spacecraft of humans engaged in a war against hideous alien monsters. After the monsters kidnap, rape and mutilate one of the Captain's men, the Captain finds himself sexually obsessed with them (**Fig. 6-5**), and is finally transformed into a monster himself. Sherman thus uses the science fiction trope of violently sexual, grotesque aliens as a metaphor for dealing with not only being gay but confronting more kinky or "dark" sexual desires and fantasies. Sherman tends to draw even his human characters rather grotesquely, in a way that recalls older underground comix artists such as Robert Crumb. He uses thick lines and draws lumpy, blocky, and almost deformed-looking bodies and faces, emphasizing the fine line between the "human" or "normal" and the "monstrous" or "deviant."

Jon Macy

I now turn in the remainder of this chapter to a more detailed analysis of the work of Jon Macy, who also employs fantastic tropes in his erotic comics, and in particular his erotic series *Fearful Hunter*. Macy was born in California in 1964, and was interested in comics and drawing from an early age.[714] His professional comics career spans from 1990 to the present day, beginning with the surreal series *Tropo,*[715] published by the small independent publisher Blackbird Comics from 1990 to 1994, followed by the eight-issue erotic horror comic *Nefarismo*,[716] published by Fantagraphics between 1994 and 1995.[717] Between 1994 and 1997, Macy contributed to the erotic gay comics anthology

[713] Sherman's "Monster War" was serialized in his *Wanky Comics* no. 1-4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fear for the Folk, 2002-2003).
[714] Jon Macy, interview with author, tape recording, San Francisco, CA, 19th July 2008. Further information in this section from the same source.
[715] Jon Macy, *Tropo* no. 1-7 (Austin, TX: Blackbird Comics, 1990-1992).
[716] Jon Macy, Nefarismo no. 1-8 (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 1994-1995).
[717] Jon Macy, interview with author, tape recording, San Francisco, CA, 19th July 2008. Further information in this section from the same source.

Meatmen, and between 1997 and 2000 he did erotic comics for a number of pornographic magazines.[718]

Between 2000 and 2008, Macy took a hiatus from comics publishing, and worked on *Teleny and Camille*, a graphic novel adaptation of the Victorian work of erotic fiction *Teleny*, attributed to Oscar Wilde and his circle. In 2010, Macy self-published *Teleny and Camille* in an edition of one hundred; a second edition of the book was published by Northwest Press later the same year.[719] Between 2010 and 2014, Macy self-published the four-issue series *Fearful Hunter*[720] – a supernatural erotic/romantic drama about the relationship between a trainee druid and a troubled werewolf. The four issues were collected as a graphic novel published by Northwest Press in 2014.[721]

When Macy first began creating comics there was no high-profile gay comics anthology being published. *Gay Comix* was still on hiatus, and Macy was not yet aware of Robert Kirby's *Strange Looking Exile*. Macy, like Kirby, felt alienated by much of the existing gay cartooning he was aware of; the work of artists like Gerard Donelan and other "gay ghetto" cartoonists, with "all the gay guys look[ing] the same, and this pot-calling-the-kettle-black type of gay humour."[722] Macy says he felt uncomfortable with the idea of doing "gay ghetto" comics, but does nevertheless explore the tensions within the LGBT community in many of his comics, often representing the community through metaphorical institutions, such as "The School of Evil" in *Nefarismo* and the brotherhood of Druids in *Fearful Hunter*. Thus Macy's erotic comics touch on many of the same themes as artists like Robert Kirby, who work in non-pornographic modes.

While taking up the conventions of the gay porno comics genre, Macy's comics are also different from the majority of mainstream gay porno comics in a number of ways. First, Macy represents erotic protagonists that are more fully-rounded than the majority of characters found in gay male porno comics. Where

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[718] Jon Macy, "Hot Water," *Steam* vol. 1, no. 3 – vol. 3, no. 4 (1994-1996); Jon Macy, "Tailblazer," *Bunkhouse* no. 17-29 (1997-2000); Jon Macy, "Midnight Sons," *International Leatherman* no. 25-30 (1999-2000).
[719] Jon Macy, *Teleny and Camille* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2010).
[720] Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter* no. 1-4 (San Francisco, CA: Jon Macy, 2010-2014).
[721] Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2014).
[722] Jon Macy, interview.

the protagonists of the majority of gay porno comics are happy, horny, and unashamed, Macy's characters demonstrate a much wider range of feelings from love and horniness to sadness, fear, and shame. Second, Macy's comics present a critique of queer communities, which are portrayed as demanding of conformity as heteronormative society. Finally, Macy's comics present a critique of heteronormativity, representing queer sex itself as a magical force that destroys the illusion of stable identities, and literally transforms the possibilities of what is seen as "normal" or "natural." The next three sections explore each of these aspects in turn.

Archives of Feeling: Fear and Shame

As discussed in Chapter Three, the gay comics and illustrations of the pre-Stonewall era rejected the image of the "sad young man"[723] as a homophobic representation of gay identity. Instead, they presented an idealised image of the gay man as strong, traditionally masculine, healthy and *happy*. This at the time subversive image of happy, unashamed, and masculine gay men quickly became a convention of gay pornographic comics. As a result, the erotic protagonists of these narratives have become "flat" characters, devoid of a *range* of emotional expression, rarely allowed to demonstrate any more troubling, negative or ambivalent feelings about sex. Macy's comics, and especially *Fearful Hunter*, depart from conventional representations of gay men in pornographic comics by portraying characters with a more complicated inner life. As he puts it,

> Any sex story, or sexual situation I put my characters in is already a cliché. I have to show what's going on in their heads and hearts to make it matter to a reader.[724]

This is not always a happy or straightforward matter, and if *Fearful Hunter* can be said to present, in Cvetkovich's phrase, an "archive of feelings," it

[723] See Dyer, "Seen to be believed," 2002.
[724] Macy, interview.

is not a wholly happy one. However, as Sarah Ahmed argues, it is important to foster "an active disbelief in the necessary alignment of the happy with the good."[725] Indeed, *Fearful Hunter*'s heroes are portrayed as "good" – and sexy – even though they are *not* entirely happy. By challenging the conventions of gay porno comics and allowing their characters to have an inner life replete with unhappiness and struggle, Macy, along with other artists such as Hall and MacIsaac, render their protagonists far more intriguing and perhaps easier to relate to than the characters in most traditional gay porno comics.

As Ahmed puts it, there are "good reasons for telling stories of queer happiness" as a response to "the very presumption that a queer life is necessarily and inevitably an unhappy life."[726] However, "at the same time, and perhaps for the same reasons . . . telling stories about queer unhappiness might matter."[727]

Telling an erotic story that involves queer unhappiness points to the ways in which queer relationships can be threatened both from outside and within. At different points, both Oisin's and Byron's own respective fears threaten to tear their relationship apart. Indeed the word "fear" is part of the narrative's very title. Fearful or unhappy emotions play an important role throughout the story, and are presented as both personal and unique to these characters, but also as signalling broader social conflicts and injustices. As Ahmed describes, "It is not that queers feel sad or wretched right from the beginning" but instead might "become sad or wretched, because they are perceived as lacking what causes happiness, and as causing unhappiness in their lack."[728]

Oisin's magical nature casts him as the cause of unhappiness for his family; Byron too is portrayed as causing the Wolf-pack unhappiness because of his own unhappiness. As Ahmed describes, "You can be made unhappy by not being what the other wants you to be, even if you don't want to be what the

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[725] Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 89.
[726] Ibid., 94.
[727] Ibid., 94-95.
[728] Ibid., 98.

other wants you to be."[729] In an early scene from *Fearful Hunter*, Oisin disobeys his teacher Tavius, venturing to a pub for magical people just outside the town, yearning to meet a lover. "I've always done the right thing, tried to be perfect like I could somehow earn happiness," says Oisin, "But now I see happiness is not earned, it's taken." The pub turns out to be a punk-rock queer club where a variety of supernatural beings intermingle with humans. Macy draws more or less in what Witek calls the "naturalistic mode," though at times his work incorporates elements of the "cartoon mode," becoming more schematized and exaggerated. However, the bodies he draws retain relatively normal proportions. Physiques in particular are rendered in lovingly naturalistic detail, emphasizing their eroticism.

In a series of wordless panels on one page, Macy deploys the comics medium's unusual relationship between space and time to show us Oisin's loneliness, yearning and alienation (**Fig. 6-6**). The breakdown of the panels here is fairly traditional, conforming to the conventional American comics grid of three tiers, each composed usually of one, two or three panels at most. The two panels in the first tier of the page show a number of sensually-drawn, attractive, half-naked men socializing at the club. The first panel shows two men, placed to the left of the panel, their bodies and faces pointing toward the left and beyond the panel borders, implicitly watching the punk-rock band (shown on the previous page). The body language of the second man in particular, placed exactly in the middle of the panel, has a confident, somewhat haughty air.

On the right hand side of the same panel, Macy draws another man, his body turning away from the band to the right, while his head is shown in mid-profile turning left, as if in movement, looking back toward the band as if something has caught his eye. All the characters in the panel are drawn with simplified features, but especially the man on the right is drawn with no facial features rendered clearly at all. This schematic style also suggests that we are seeing these men from Oisin's subjective viewpoint, experiencing them not as

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[729] Ibid., 96.

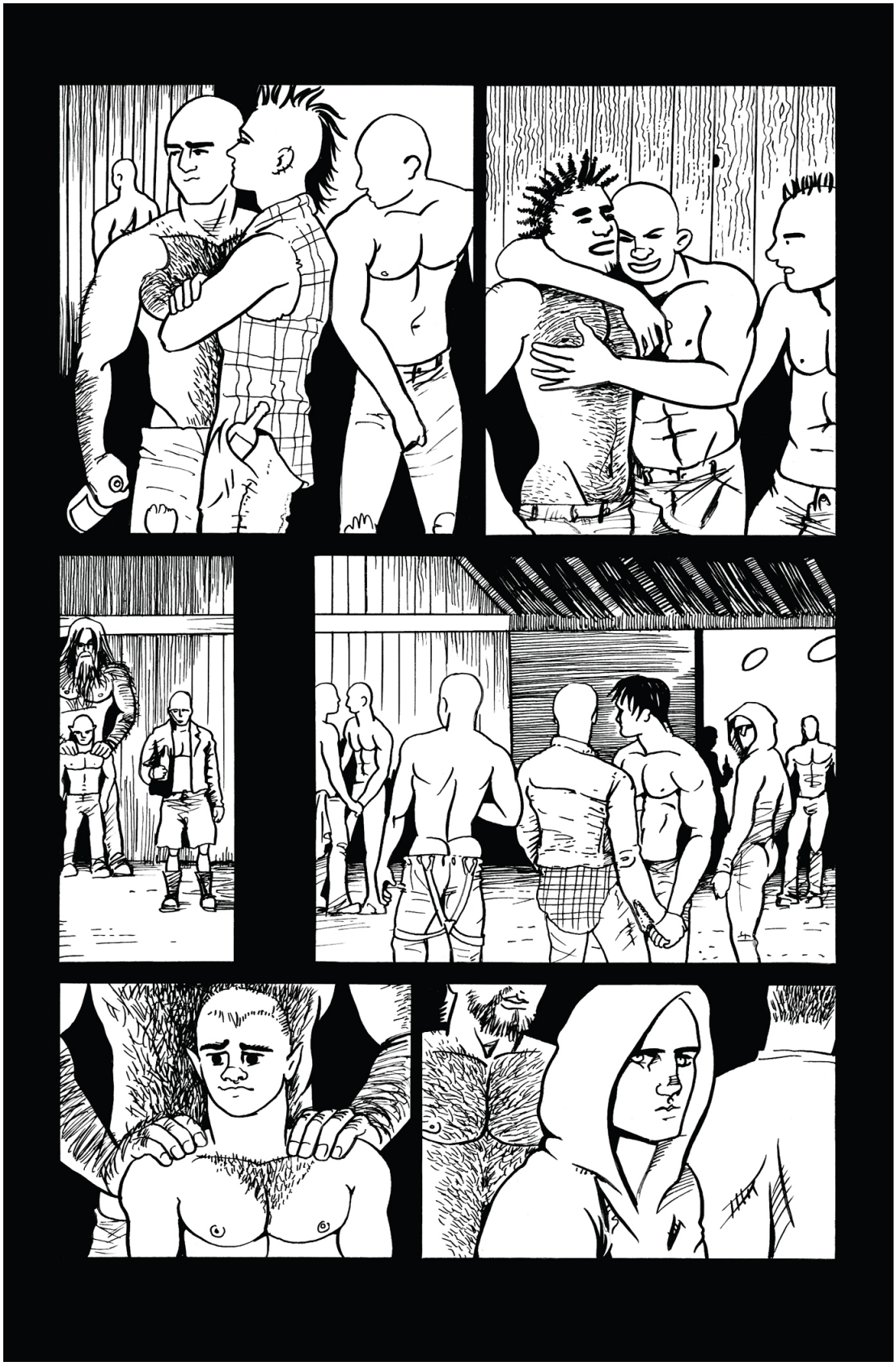

Fig. 6-6 – Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 31.

fully-formed individuals but as simplified "types." The second panel in the first tier, similarly, shows three men, all bare-chested, laughing and embracing.

The middle tier is occupied by a single panel that shows a panoramic view of the pub, portraying more patrons mingling – or is it in fact two panels? Because Macy has inked the gutters of this page a solid black, a pillar in the foreground toward the left of this scene also acts as a very wide gutter, effectively separating this panoramic panel into two and exaggerating a sense of the wide, open space of the bar, and also Oisin's – and our – sense of loneliness and alienation. Because, as Scott McCloud notes, "*time and space* [in comics] are *one and the same*,"[730] this exaggeration of the space also creates the sense that quite some time is passing in the one/two panels in this tier. The men in the bar shown in this scene are almost all in couples; their faces are drawn schematically if it all. Oisin's figure is placed to the far right of this panorama, looking back over his shoulder, taking in the crowd but separate from it. In the final panel we see a mid-close-up of Oisin's face, registering anxiety, shyness, uncertainty, and yearning. In contrast with the half-naked bodies of these men and their open and happy body language, Oisin is closed-off physically and emotionally, his body covered up and his face partially obscured under his hooded jacket.

At the bar, Oisin works a spell to seek out the man he desires: the Wolf-boy, Byron. Byron is unwilling to become involved with a Druid, explaining that wolves mate for life whereas Druids traditionally do not bond emotionally. This admission of fear, vulnerability, and a desire for more than sex marks *Fearful Hunter* out from the majority of mainstream gay porno comics. Unlike the "flat" characters in the work of Tom of Finland, Etienne and others, Byron and Oisin have doubts and mixed feelings about sex that are not usually part of the emotional repertoire of the conventional gay porno protagonist.

Despite Byron's protestations, Oisin convinces him to come to Tavius's tower, where they have sex for the first time. However, Tavius conspires with the other Druids to separate the young lovers. The Druids' philosophy is entirely anti-monogamy. At the climax of the story, Tavius chides Oisin: "You

[730] McCloud, *Understanding*, 100.

are joining the rulers of the Earth. You can have any boy you want." Oisin replies "I just want the one." Oisin's desires do not fit comfortably with the Druids' values. In another scene, Byron also says he is "not a very good Wolf." In two "flashback" scenes, which show images of Oisin's and of Byron's respective childhoods, Macy presents us with more emotional information about his two erotic leads. In one scene, after they have sex, Oisin sees a memory from Byron's childhood; sex has created a telepathic bond between them. In this memory, the Wolf-Lord commands the frightened Byron to kill a rabbit, but he only wounds it, leaving it in tremendous pain (**Fig. 6-7**). The Wolf-Lord finishes the job while Byron curls up, sobbing. The Wolf-Lord names Byron "Fearful Hunter" – thus fear is integral to Byron's sense of identity.

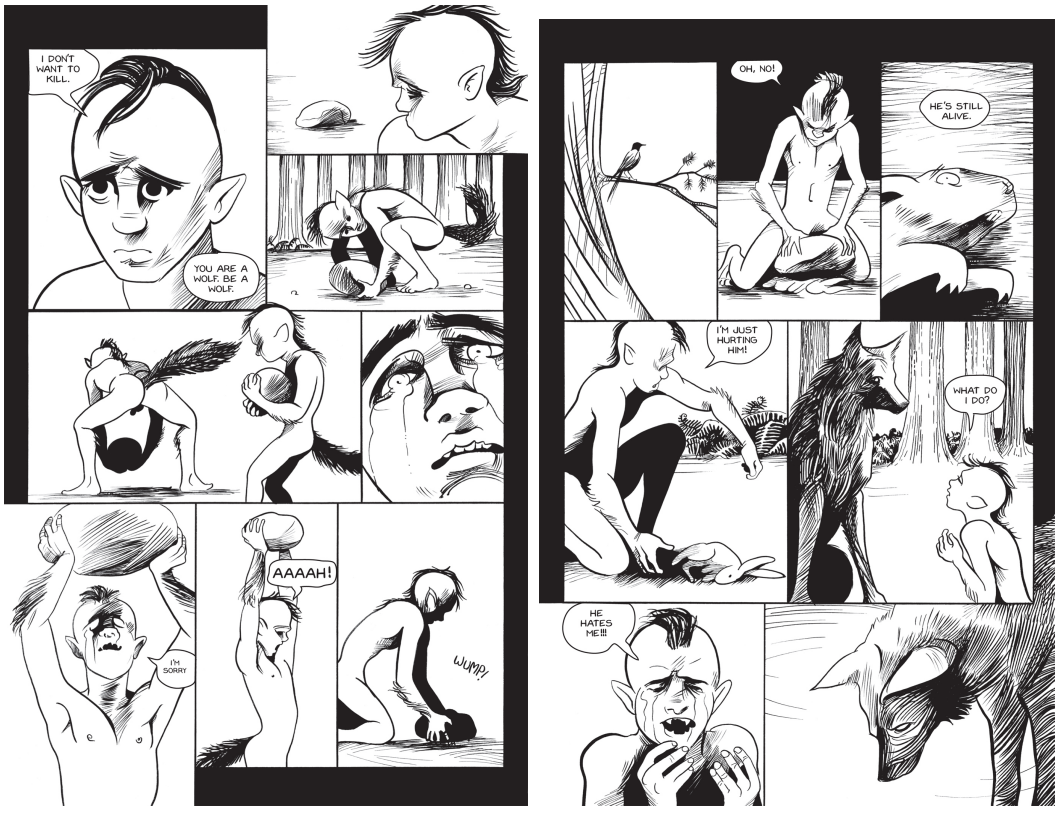

Fig. 6-7 – Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 117-118.

Byron's fearful and "un-Wolflike" feelings are the focus of a page on which Macy lays out 8 panels across three tiers.[731] The very thin gutters between the panels decrease the tension Hatfield notes between the single image and the image-in-series,[732] creating a sense of hurried movement from panel to panel, switching quickly between close-ups of Byron's face and showing his whole body. He bends over awkwardly to pick up a rock, carries it over to the rabbit with his head bent down, ashamed and reluctant; he holds the rock high above his own head as if afraid of it, before smashing it onto the rabbit's head while screaming in terror.

Byron's face is shown repeatedly in close-up or medium close-up, his brows knitted anxiously, tears streaming from his eyes. Macy communicates painful emotions through the way he draws his characters' bodies and faces. The style here is loose and scratchy, emphasizing the anxiety of this experience. The contrast between the black gutters and the white spaces in each panel underlines the starkness and pain of this scene, and the schematic backgrounds emphasize that this is a memory: the space the character occupies is less

Fig. 6-8 - Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 189 (excerpt).

[731] Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2014), 117.
[732] See Hatfield, *Alternative*, 41-48.

Fig. 6-9 - Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 190.

important than the shame he carries and communicates through his face and body. Byron is indeed "not a very good Wolf" in conventional terms, just as Oisin is not a good Druid – both are outsiders in their respective communities.

The second "flashback" is Byron's vision of Oisin's childhood, and emphasizes the way a feeling of shame has shaped Oisin's sense of being an outsider. The

fourth chapter of *Fearful Hunter* opens with a memory of the ten-year-old Oisin being "discovered" in his back garden by his mother. Crouched in the bushes, Oisin at first appears to be masturbating (**Fig. 6-8**). But the first panoramic panel on the following page (**Fig. 6-9**), which takes up most of the page's upper half, reveals that it is "worse": he is in fact talking with animals, a sign of his nascent magical talents that his mother considers "dirty."

Reminiscent of iconic scenes from Disney's *Snow White*, this panel shows the young Oisin standing in the centre of a group of animals. His slender frame, caught in an awkward pose, rendered loosely, emphasizes his youthful vulnerability, making him look akin to the crooked trees that provide the panel's backdrop, while the wide eyes of the animals around him mirror his own shocked expression. Oisin's ability to communicate with animals is "dirty" to his mother. Though his power makes him "unnatural," Oisin's visual similarity to the trees and animals suggests that in fact Oisin is *more* natural than the human/heteronormative order which brands him a "freak." Oisin's mother beats him with a garden rake; while the animals' expressions are drawn in a relatively detailed way, Oisin's mother's face and eyes are obscured, in shadow in panel two and cut off in panel four, which instead focuses on her angry mouth – half-opened, with sharp teeth – portraying her as frightening, like a witch from a fairytale, and more bestial than the actual animals surrounding Oisin. The final panel shows Oisin lying on the ground, his head turned downward in an iconic expression of shame.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, the affect of shame is strongly intertwined with the making of identity; rather than being "distinct 'toxic' parts" of an identity "that can be excised," the "forms taken by shame" are instead "integral to . . . the processes by which identity itself is formed."[733] Sedgwick writes of Henry James's attempt in the prefaces to the New York edition of his work to eroticize his own shame at his early works "as a way of coming into

[733] Eve Kosfsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 62-63.

loving relation to queer or 'compromising' youth,"[734] an attempt to love the self of his younger works both "in spite of shame and . . . through it."[735] Byron's and Oisin's shameful memories of childhood, experienced telepathically by one another, are shown as important in making these characters who they are, and in consolidating each character's sense of love and attachment for the other, not in spite of this shame but through it.

Ultimately in *Fearful Hunter*, the two erotic protagonists are shown as able to negotiate and transform their shame and unhappiness enough to resist assimilation to the values of the Druids or the human world. With their shame and fear, Oisin and Byron – like many of the characters in the alternative gay porno comics – are more complex than the one-dimensionally horny, fearless and unashamed heroes of conventional gay porno comics.

Conformist Queer Communities and the Gay Male Sex Wars

In this section, I discuss how Jon Macy's erotic comics critique demands for conformity from within the gay or queer community. I argue that they constitute a response to the internal debates within the gay male community that Thomas Piontek has characterised as the "gay male sex wars" – the "deeply entrenched conflict" pitting "sex-positive" gay men against "sex-negative" ones in a struggle "over the very meaning and morality of gay sex."[736]

Throughout Jon Macy's oeuvre we find metaphoric representations of gay or queer community, which Macy portrays in a not altogether-positive light. Each of these "communities" is portrayed as on the one hand sexually liberated and transgressive, but on the other hand, each is shown to be just as conformist, hierarchical, and dogmatic as the heteronormative "outside world" it purports to rebel against. In these representations, Macy attempts to intervene in a situation in which self-proclaimed sexual "outsiders" have become a relatively powerful elite, developing a subculture with its own disciplinary regimes and

[734] Ibid., 41.
[735] Ibid., 40.
[736] Piontek, *Queering*, 31.

demands for what Macy refers to as an "enforced non-conformity."[737] As Macy puts it,

> The outsider becomes the insider once they've established themselves, and then they don't realize they're not outsiders anymore. They're also people that should know better. If they're outsiders, why are they picking on other outsiders?[738]

Macy's statements here echo Thomas Piontek's writings on the "gay male sex wars,"[739] debates between gay writers on the meaning of gay sex, which have taken place in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, creating two opposing factions among gay men "by further escalating long-standing conflicts about the significance and morality of gay sex."[740] One faction – represented by spokesmen such as Larry Kramer, Bruce Bawer and Andrew Sullivan – are collectively referred to as sex-negative, tending to downplay the significance of sex for gay lives and politics. This sex-negative critique is often associated with gay conservatism and with the argument that the majority of gay men are "virtually normal" – indistinguishable from heterosexual culture – and only want "a place at the table" of American democracy.[741] Gay conservatives like Bawer and Sullivan contrast themselves with "subculture-oriented gays," who are deviant and sex-focused, spoiling their chances at assimilation.

On the other hand, "sex-positive" writers, including Douglas Crimp, John M. Clum, and Michael Bronski, share a belief that "sexuality has played a central part in the construction and development of gay male culture and politics."[742] Douglas Crimp, for example, in his programmatic essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," argues that promiscuity provides a glimpse of truly liberated sexual desire, and that "having adjusted our sex lives so as to

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[737] Macy, interview
[738] Ibid.
[739] Piontek, *Queering*, 31.
[740] Ibid., 34.
[741] *Virtually Normal* is the title of Bruce Bawer's book; *A Place at the Table* is Andrew Sullivan's assimilationist polemic.
[742] Piontek, *Queering*, 34.

protect ourselves and one another" in the wake of AIDS, it is now time for gay men to reclaim "our promiscuous love of sex."[743] For Crimp, as Piontek puts it, "[r]eclaiming their sexual culture . . . is a political responsibility for gay men in the face of a hostile mainstream society."[744]

Given the sexual normativity of mainstream heterosexual culture and attempts to blame the HIV/AIDS epidemic on gay men's sexual behaviour, such statements on the part of sex-positive gay writers is entirely understandable. However, as Piontek points out,

> Once the defense of gay promiscuity becomes official policy, any writer who so much as contemplates monogamy as a choice and does not come out squarely in the defense of promiscuity automatically violates that policy.[745]

The characters in most mainstream gay porno comics can be seen as embodiments of "sex-positive" discourses which valorise liberated and promiscuous sex and with discourses within contemporary gay male culture which represent men as "naturally" promiscuous, constantly horny, and de-emphasize the emotional aspects of gay men's identities. However – while the majority of Macy's stories are full of sex, and much of it kinky or transgressive – the characters in many of Macy's comics yearn for love *as well as sex*. In many of his stories, the central character(s) struggle against the conventions and normalizing regimes of society around them, in opposition to heteronormativity and homophobia, but also against the institutions and norms of supposedly more enlightened and "sexually liberated" groups. These are the outsiders who have become insiders, as Macy puts it in the quote above, and who glorify hedonism at the expense of love.

Like Robert Kirby and other alternative queer cartoonists whose main body of work is *not* fantastical *or* pornographic, Jon Macy's work displays a

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[743] Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in his, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 270.
[744] Piontek, *Queering*, 36.
[745] Ibid., 37.

strong mistrust of conformity – including the "nonconformist conformity" of queer communities. In *Nefarismo* and *Fearful Hunter*, we see two such institutions: the School of Evil and the company of Druids. The denizens of the School of Evil are outsiders in the context of wider society who have formed a kind of "community" of insiders and created hierarchies and divisions that reproduce those of the outside world. Similarly, in *Fearful Hunter*, the Druids are feared and hated by magicless humans, but have in turn established a culture that is elitist, dogmatic, and emotionally empty.

The School of Evil is an institution that puts sexual power and cruelty above any sense of loyalty or love. The drawing style Macy employs in *Nefarismo* is different than in his other works. Rather than pen-and-ink, he uses an ink wash, reminiscent of watercolour, which gives the pages of *Nefarismo* a dense, suffocating and oppressive atmosphere, mirroring the insularity and claustrophobia of the School itself. This feeling of oppressiveness underscores Macy's critique of community. *Nefarismo* follows a young man, Ilia, who takes a job at the School and meets various characters, including the School's ambitious head instructor Mistress Blanca, a woman who cross-dresses in masculine attire, and "The Poorbeast," a pair of male lovers referred to as if they were a single entity. The Poorbeast are represented as utterly committed to one another, but are told that one must murder the other in order to graduate from the School of Evil and achieve apotheosis. However, in *Nefarismo* no. 7, the Poorbeast ends up covered in flaming, molten ejaculate. The Poorbeast starts to burn, until it is revealed transformed – each of the male lovers now has both a cock *and* an anus growing from their chests (**Fig. 6-10**). As Ilya exclaims, "Each of them has half a heart and is ejaculating all their blood!" In order to stay alive, the two men have to fuck each other's chests before they both bleed to death. They literally cannot live without each other. Their state of ecstasy transports them bodily to Heaven, and they achieve the apotheosis Blanca yearns for, *not* by betraying one another as the School of Evil commands, but through a sexual act that symbolizes perhaps the ultimate in intimacy and interconnectedness.

Fig. 6-10 – Jon Macy, *Nefarismo* No. 7, np.

The kind of struggle portrayed in *Nefarismo* – between individualistic hedonism, and loyalty and commitment between partners – is also strongly at play in *Fearful Hunter*. The Druids in *Fearful Hunter* teach that sexual energy must be used for communing with the Gods to gain power. Oisin's tutor, Tavius, warns him that while sex with multiple partners is not discouraged, for Oisin to form an emotional and sexual bond with another individual is looked on with scorn, as a distraction from his true calling. Oisin defies this edict and becomes involved with the Wolf-boy Byron, who, like all wolves, mates for life. The conflict between the Druids' demands for conformity and what Oisin wants in terms of a fulfilling sexual relationship drives the narrative of *Fearful Hunter*.

Not all forms of community are equally oppressive in *Fearful Hunter*. Byron's Wolf-pack is portrayed as much more accepting of difference than the brotherhood of Druids. In one scene, Byron and Oisin meet the Wolf-pack and participate in a wild party. This sequence is reminiscent of the scene in the supernatural gay punk bar. For example, the first two panels of one page in this scene (**Fig. 6-11**), show half-naked Wolf-men embracing and revelling. But this time Oisin and Byron are fully involved in the revels. The third panel shows a

male Wolf couple kissing, one biting the other's mouth animalistically, and the fourth panel echoes the third, showing a close-up – not of that couple, but of Oisin similarly biting Byron's lip. Byron's hair is tousled and spills over his eyes, echoing Oisin's luxuriously rendered, thick eyelashes. The fifth panel shows Byron and Oisin staring at each other, in silhouette. The hairs, scratches and shadows on the men's bodies on this page mirrors the flames and smoke from the bonfire as well as the knotted trees, and underscores the chaotic, wild passion of these lovers.

Fig. 6-11 – Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 172.

Fig. 6-12 – Jon Macy, "The Ring." *Meatmen* vol. 18, 36-37.

Fig. 6-13 – Jon Macy, "The Ring." *Meatmen* vol. 18, 44.

Oisin swears his love to Byron and at the end of the revelry they have sex again in the forest. It turns out this party is a wedding ceremony of sorts, reminiscent of the revels in Macy's story "The Ring" from *Meatmen* no. 18, published in 1996. "The Ring" is a sexualized version of the fairy tale "Cinderella," in which a young man searching for love in a sex club briefly encounters a mysterious Voodoo Man who leaves behind a magical cock-ring (glass slipper) that causes "waves of uncontrollable lust" to wash over the patrons of the sex club, inciting a bacchanalian orgy. Macy's use of high-contrast black and white inking, extreme "camera angles" in some panels, and the exaggerated, lustful faces of some of the patrons, give the story a slightly ominous and grotesque atmosphere (**Fig. 6-12**). The young man is then fucked by a mysterious man in a leather mask, whom he realizes is his "True Love," the Voodoo Man. In the final panel, the couple return to the Voodoo Man's "magical leather dungeon," the younger man throwing the cock-ring into the crowd of sex club patron's like a bride throwing a bouquet. The cock-ring is also, metaphorically, a kind of wedding ring (**Fig. 6-13**).

In both these "wedding scenes," we see a much more accepting and less polarized representation of monogamy and promiscuity, which rejects the black-and-white mentalities of "sex-positive" versus "sex-negative" gay critics engaged in the "gay male sex wars" Piontek discusses. Committing to one another, Oisin and Byron are nevertheless also portrayed as *part of* the Wolf-pack. While they do not have sex with the other wolves, they do participate in a kind of outdoors orgy where different couples rut alongside one another with abandon. Similarly in "The Ring", after the magic cock-ring incites an orgy in the sex-club, the young protagonist is fucked by – and "married" to – the man in the leather mask, in front of the other sex-club patrons.

In much queer theoretical discourse, monogamy is described as assimilationist to heteronormative values and boring. Gay couples who opt for monogamy are represented as conservative and passionless, whereas polyamorous or promiscuous queer relations are exciting and "alive." Michael Warner, for example, presents an anodyne, asexual caricature of assimilated

gays as "happily coupled veterinarians in a suburban tract home with nothing more scandalous on their minds than wearing white linen after Labor Day."[746] In contrast, the "true love" experienced between the younger and older man in "The Ring," and between Oisin and Byron in *Fearful Hunter*, is monogamous but nevertheless passionate, kinky, and highly sexualized. Moreover, it is not set against promiscuity but allowed to coexist with other kinds of sexual relationships that are not monogamous and are portrayed as equally exciting, passionate and valid.

The Druids who forbid monogamous intimacy are dogmatic, but Byron's friend, Shea the Were-fox, delights in his own promiscuity whilst also supporting Byron and Oisin's monogamous relationship, helping Byron infiltrate the Druid's sanctuary in order to rescue Oisin.

In *Fearful Hunter*, Macy represents Oisin and Byron as transcending the norms and expectations of society through their alliances with other outsiders, and through their love for one another. In many of Macy's comics, but perhaps most forcefully in *Fearful Hunter*, love is represented as the ultimate transgression within institutions where sexual transgression and self-interested hedonism are celebrated and even demanded.

Identity-Shattering Sex and Hybrid Bodies

In this section, I examine a third characteristic of Macy's work that challenges the conventional gay porno comics genre: the representation of sex as a destabilizing force. In Macy's comics, sex literally transforms and disrupts bodies and identities, creating or summoning queer bodies that are hybrid, fluid and malleable; combine male and female features in one body; or hybridize the human and the animal. Macy also depicts sex as a force that disrupts any sense of unitary bodies and stable identities, so that the body is represented as porous, open and fluid, connecting with other beings. In this way, sex in Macy's comics presents a challenge to heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality as stable, unified and binaristic. Like Brad Rader's *Harry and Dickless Tom*, the

[746] Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 49.

transformations of gender in Macy's *Nefarismo,* and the presence of a variety of female and hermaphrodite figures mark it out as quite different from the vast majority of most traditional gay porno comics, which are populated entirely by male characters.

When lovers have sex in Macy's comics, their identities seem to dissolve. In this way, Macy echoes Georges Bataille's view of sex as self-shattering. Sex, death and violence are inextricably linked for Bataille. Eroticism signifies "a violation of the very being of its practitioners" – the symbolic murder or dissolution of the self, a disruption of individuality, separateness and discontinuity. "The whole business of eroticism," he says, "is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives."[747]

Bataille's ideas about eroticism inform Leo Bersani's views of gay sex as self-shattering in his essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Bersani argues that many gay and lesbian writers including Pat Califia, Gayle Rubin, and Michel Foucault have engaged, in different ways, in an attempt to make sexuality "less disturbing, less socially abrasive, less violent, more respectful of 'personhood' than it has been in a male-dominated, phallocentric culture."[748] Bersani however praises anti-pornography feminist writers Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon because, he argues, they "refus[e] to prettify [sex], to romanticize it, to maintain that fucking has anything to do with community or love," which Bersani claims has the unintended but "immensely desirable effect of publicizing, of lucidly laying out for us, the inestimable value of sex as . . . anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving."[749] In a post-AIDS context, Bersani argues, gay men should, rather than apologize for promiscuity or valorise monogamy, "ceaselessly lament the practical necessity" of monogamy in the wake of AIDS and "resist being drawn into mimicking the unrelenting warfare between men and women, which nothing has ever changed."[750]

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[747] Bataille, *Eroticism*, 17.
[748] Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", *October*, Vol. 43 (Winter 1987), 215.
[749] Ibid..
[750] Ibid., 218.

Bersani's book *Homos* extends the ideas explored in this essay, formulating a theory of anti-relationality, proposing that "perhaps inherent in gay desire" is "a potentially revolutionary inaptitude . . . for sociality as it is known."[751] Bersani argues that "homo-ness" can constitute "a political threat . . . because of the energies it releases, energies made available for the unprecedented projects of human organization."[752] Bersani, drawing on Bataille's contention that eroticism involves the destruction of the individual, argues that homo-ness involves a "self-shattering,"[753] and thus a loss of the "self" which is "the precondition for registration and service as a citizen."[754]

In Macy's comics, sex is often represented as identity-dissolving. In this sense, his work chimes with Bersani's ideas. However, this does not lead to a repudiation of relationality, as in Bersani's work. For Macy, sex does not simply destroy or dissolve identity, but rather destroys the barriers between seemingly separate individuals, instead connecting beings with other beings, as well as with animals, plants, Gods, and the wider cosmos. All these connections and relationships are sexual in some way for Macy. In opposition to the norms expounded by "communities" such as the Druids in *Fearful Hunter*, or the School of Evil in *Nefarismo*, the world is shown to have value because of strong connections – ties of friendship, love, and attraction – with others. Thus, sex in Macy's comics is ultimately always relational, rather than the anti-relational practice described by Bersani.

Macy's comics thus resonate with the theoretical writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for whom all life is sexual in that all being is based on desire and the connections between different beings. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari use the term "desiring-machines" to describe the outcome of any series of connections: the connection of the breast – "a machine that produces milk" – with the mouth – "a machine coupled to it";[755] or of "the orchid

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[751] Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1995), 76.
[752] Ibid., 123.
[753] Ibid., 101.
[754] Ibid., 125.
[755] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 1.

and the male wasp it attracts."[756] They challenge the Freudian view of desire as based on lack, arguing that

> desire does not take as its objects persons or things, but the entire surroundings that it traverses, the vibrations and flows of every sort to which it is joined, introducing therein breaks and captures and making it an always nomadic and migrant desire.[757]

Deleuze and Guattari reject the terms by which we define ourselves and others. As they write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, they see sexuality as "badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes," because sexuality "brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like *n* [an indefinite number of] sexes . . . Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings."[758] In Deleuze and Guattari's writing, and in Macy's comics, desire flows in myriad different ways, creating different connections between humans, Gods, plants, animals and more, meaning that identities, bodies and sexualities are never fully stable, fixed or rigid. In some ways, this view also chimes with Bersani's call for a "homo-ness" that "rejects personhood, a status that the law needs to discipline us."[759] Deleuze and Guattari also ultimately valorise a rejection of stable identity, calling for an ultimate "becoming-imperceptible" of all beings as a goal.

Identity is not dissolved in quite such a radical way in Macy's comics. After all, his exploration of Byron and Oisin's emotional worlds relies on some conception of stable identity. Bersani's lamentation of monogamy and valorisation of promiscuity and "intimacies devoid of intimacy,"[760] too, contrasts with Macy's more positive view of monogamy and promiscuity as co-existing, discussed earlier. However Macy's view of sex as destabilizing identity does resonate with Bersani, and Deleuze and Guattari. The mutability of the

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[756] Ibid., 285.
[757] Ibid., 292.
[758] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 278.
[759] Bersani, *Homos*, 129.
[760] Ibid., 128.

body and instability of identity is represented in various ways in *Fearful Hunter*, including scenes where humans have sex with gods. In these sequences, Macy also suggests both the pleasure and the horror of sex. Sex is portrayed as an often-terrifying experience, indeed, as "disturbing," "abrasive," and "violent," as Bersani might put it.[761] In one scene, Oisin meets and communes with the god Diultach. Diultach is shown rising from the river on a throne made of the bodies of male river-spirits who are perpetually licking the god's body (**Fig 6-14**). Diultach is represented as a large, muscular and fearsome male, his face covered in shadow. He decides that Oisin is attractive to him and emits multiple phallic tentacles from his mouth that encircle Oisin's body, caressing his cock, and penetrating his mouth and anus, finally ejaculating into both, disrupting any sense of the body's separateness or stability (**Fig. 6-15**). When Diultach's

Fig. 6-14 – Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 77-78.

[761] Bersani, "Rectum," 215.

Fig. 6-15 – Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 82-83.

Fig. 6-16 – Jon Macy, *Fearful Hunter*, 105.

face is revealed in one panel, he is portrayed with phallic horns protruding from his own eye sockets. His form is mutable, and he – like these sex scenes – is portrayed as both alluring *and* horrific.

The high contrast black-and-white inking in this scene, as well as the way the gutters of the page are inked a solid black, and the scratchy shading on the characters' bodies, all contribute to the scene's frightening atmosphere. Tavius's "voice-over" in the narrative captions in this scene exalts the experience of sex with a God (or "Ally"), and talks about sex transforming men into Gods. His reverential tone contrasts with the rather terrifying imagery on these pages, leading us to question the truth of his words, or conversely, to understand sex as an experience where fear and ecstasy can co-exist in equal measure. Further, the scene is an illustration of the power of connections in Macy's work, and his portrayal of life as being innately relational and interconnected.

Later, when Oisin has sex with the gigantic Horned God Anuid, he experiences a vision where he sees himself invaded by the God's nervous system. The tentacle-like nerves of the God wrap around Oisin's neck, arms and legs, but also penetrate his eyes, nostrils and mouth. Sex disrupts the stable boundaries of the body. On one page (**Fig. 6-16**), Macy goes as far as disrupting the traditional breakdown of the comics page completely, getting rid of panel borders and gutters. The different moments of Oisin's encounter with Anuid are scattered across the page, happening not in physical reality but on a cosmic or spiritual level, with clouds, volcanic ash, plant-life, and the God's nerves drawn spreading to the edges of the page. The pagerepresents what Charles Hatfield has described as "synchronism, in which a single panel represents a sequence of events occurring at different 'times.'"[762] Indeed, in this page/panel, there is little sense of the orderly progression of time. Macy's exclusion of the devices that normally separate the moments in a comics narrative – panels and gutters – helps to create and emphasize the feeling that there is now little or no separation between Oisin, Anuid, and the natural world itself. Again, Macy portrays sex as terrifying, but also as a force that runs through all of life,

[762] Hatfield, *Alternative*, 52.

connecting and transforming a variety of human and non-human beings, creating instability and difference. Identities, whilst not fully dissolved, are neither fully settled nor stabilized.

The Druids understand the sex they have with Gods as affirming their superiority over other beings, and see love and openness as weakness. The Arch-Druid attempts to gain mastery over the universe, but is punished by the Gods, transformed into a tree, connected to the world via its roots but not in a position of power over it. Oisin and Byron are reunited and shown in the forest among the Wolf-pack, intimately connected to the natural world. The Mountain-God explains that the Druids have arrogantly taught that power comes from mastering the Gods and abjuring emotional connections with others. In fact, "All humans and animals are Druids" – all living beings create magic of a sort – and that rather than denying relationality, it is better to embrace it: "Power comes from strong connections."

In Macy's comics, bodily transformation of one kind or another is intertwined with these interconnections and relations. For Deleuze and Guattari, the body is seen as unstable and in process, in a constant state of becoming; in their work, as Lisa Blackman describes, "the body is never fixed and is marked by the possibility of mutation, transformation and change."[763] Resisting the gender binary for Deleuze and Guattari would involve "becoming other," and they refer to various different "becomings" in their work. For example, "becoming-imperceptible" is the goal of all becomings – a flight from fixed, stable identity.[764] Related to this are their concepts of becoming-animal, or becoming other than human, and becoming-woman. The latter is "the key to all the other becomings,"[765] because, as Claire Colebrook explains, "it is only in refusing the white, western, rational, acquisitive, voice-governed, world-surveying 'man' of good sense that life can be freed from the internalized authority of 'the subject.'"[766]

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[763] Lisa Blackman, *The Body* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 110.
[764] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 279.
[765] Ibid., 277.
[766] Claire Colebrook, *Gender* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 189-190.

While Deleuze and Guattari's ideas are intriguing, they ultimately remain vague, and it is questionable what political efficacy they may have. However, it is at least tempting to see the notion of "becoming" – becoming-animal and becoming-woman – represented quite *literally* in Macy's work, as various characters change sex, or are portrayed as human/animal hybrids. Throughout *Nefarismo*, genders are switched and mixed together. Macy's story "Tail"[767] – published in *Meatmen* – also features a range of hybridized sexual creatures that combine male and female features, as well as multiple genitals, reversals of the upper and lower body, and so on. Furthermore it is filled with references to wolves, and as originally drawn, features an image of a human/wolf hybrid. Macy's fascination with the image of the wolf recurs in the more recent *Fearful Hunter*. The trope of the wolf within – also used by Dave Davenport – is a metaphor for the secret, inner (homo)sexual self. In a story about his artistic influences, Macy is very clear about the reasons for this attraction to the figure of the werewolf in horror movies: "Werewolves ripped their human skin off to reveal their true hidden selves. They would then run into the woods totally free and natural. Of course they were almost always male, hot, and woke up naked, so these movies had my full attention."[768]

In his essay "Dreamboys, Meatmen and Werewolves," Gilad Padva interprets "Tail" as a "queer reading and erotic politicization" of the psychoanalytic "myth of the Wolf Man" analysed by Freud.[769] The case analysed by Freud centres on a dream of a patient, Sergei Pankejeff – the so-called "Wolf Man" – when he was three or four years old, in which he was terrified by the sight of several white wolves sitting on a big tree outside his window, which had several phallic details: big tails like foxes, and ears pricked up like attentive dogs. The patient woke up screaming in terror. Freud connects this dream to the fear of castration, and interprets it as the result of Pankejeff having

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[767] Jon Macy, "Tail," *Meatmen* Vol. 21, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1997), 89-103.
[768] Jon Macy, "Obsessive Repulsive," in *QU33R*, ed. Robert Kirby (Seattle: Northwest Press, 2014), 231.
[769] Gilad Padva, "Dreamboys, Meatmen and Werewolves: Visualizing Erotic Identities in All-Male Comic Strips," in *Sexualities*, vol. 8, no. 5 (December 2005), 589.

witnessed a "primal scene" of "his parents copulating from behind."[770] According to Freud, the patients "anxiety was a repudiation of the wish for sexual satisfaction from his father" and "[t]he form taken by the anxiety, the fear of 'being eaten by the wolf,' was only the . . . transposition of the wish to be copulated with by his father." [771] This desire for his father "succumbed to repression" and was replaced by a "fear of his father . . . in the shape of the wolf phobia."[772] Freud suggests, further, that his patient's passive sexual aim was transformed into the masochistic aim of being beaten or punished, thus "pathologiz[ing] and thus stigmatiz[ing] homosexuality, and anal sex between men in particular, as a neurosis."[773] In contrast, Padva argues, Macy's "Tail" (homo)eroticizes and politicizes Freud's homophobic case study because it represents male bodies and the phallus as erotic spectacles, and in the final scene when the protagonist (known as "Wolf-boy") has sex with his beloved Coach, he "feels that his true wolfish identity is performed through this very act of being penetrated" by the Coach: "they are wild, uncontrolled and undisciplined and joyfully subvert/invert Freud's homophobic notions of 'sexual aberrations' and 'sexual inverts'."[774]

Padva presents an insightful exploration of the ways in which Macy's text contributes "to the alternative discourse of sexuality, passion, body worship/body fascism and contemporary phallic regimes."[775] The narrative of "Tail" begins with a young man – the "Wolf-boy" – who, in the university showers, confides that he has always wanted to be a werewolf. He is bullied and sexually humiliated by the ostensibly heterosexual football team. This eroticized abuse draws on the heterosexual discourse identified by Mercer as a recurring characteristic in traditional gay porn narratives.[776] He is eventually inducted into a leather-clad "secret society" with "laws and a hierarchy where

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[770] Ibid., 590.
[771] Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 17, edited by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 46.
[772] Ibid.
[773] Padva, "Dreamboys," 590.
[774] Ibid., 593.
[775] Ibid., 597.
[776] Mercer, "In the Slammer," 157.

[he is] the undisputed bottom." Again, this draws on the SM discourse discussed by Mercer.[777] However, as Padva notes, rather than feeling humiliated by this abuse, the Wolf-boy enjoys it: "In this counter-cultural text, the queer subjectivity does not feel abused but amused. In other words, the wolf(boy) cries out of passion, not agony."[778]

The Brotherhood put the "Wolf-boy" in a sling and fuck him roughly. The boy blacks out, waking in a strange, alien realm populated by "erotic monsters" with grotesque and hybrid bodies. These include a man with a face instead of a penis, and an upside-down torso with mouths instead of nipples and four penises growing from its mouth, and more. On this page (**Fig. 6-17**), Macy underscores the intensity of the Wolf-boy's sexual experience by creating an almost suffocating atmosphere, abandons the more traditional breakdown of panels on the preceding pages, making the gutters between panels so thin as to be almost non-existent, and drawing some panels to resemble jagged shards of broken glass. The spaces glimpsed behind and beneath panels are filled with writhing and difficult to identify body parts and biomorphic shapes, creating an overwhelming feeling of confusion and disorientation. As Macy describes,

> It's about how sex can make you feel out of your body or inside another's body or just confused about what's going on where. Our sexual impulses are misfiring and our mind can't keep track of it all. That's the place where we realize our bodies are not just flesh but in
> our minds, and what our minds want is to keep it all neat when in reality we are fools who don't know what we really want or don't let ourselves have it.[779]

Macy's images of hermaphrodites, gender-switching, and "erotic

[777] Ibid., 161.
[778] Padva, "Dreamboys," 591.
[779] Macy, interview.

Fig. 6-17 – Jon Macy, "Tail." *Meatmen* Vol. 21, 102.

monsters" all mark out his comics as departing from the more conventional discourses of gay male porno comics, and present a challenge to normative notions of gender. As Padva observes, while earlier in the story the phallus was straightforwardly worshipped, in this scene "the phallus is simultaneously idolized and parodized, subverted and celebrated, glorified and ridiculed, admired and trivialized."[780] No longer signifying "masculine dominance or body fascism" as it often does in more conventional gay porno narratives, the phallus is now "multi-sexed, androgynized, reformed, deformed, and transformed."[781] For example, in the final panel of the "alien world" scene, a bald transgender entity wears a "scarf" made of linked, ejaculating phalluses, and bears two stitches on its flat chest and another above its huge penis. "This strategy of 'genderfuck' or gender bending" in Macy's work, as Padva emphasizes, "undermines sexual essentialism and determinism."[782]

The gender transformations in Macy's work happen because, as Macy himself puts it, he wants to make the point that "Gender doesn't mean anything."[783] Macy also explains why he places female and hybrid or hermaphrodite characters into what would otherwise be straightforwardly gay male erotic comics:

> I'm showing multiple sexual perspectives at once, layers of sex, emotion, and mind . . . People are afraid of those weird little bi thoughts that creep in from time to time. They are just thoughts and can't hurt you.[784]

Macy's concerns with the complexity of sexual desires echo those of cartoonists like MacIsaac and Hall, who do not use supernatural tropes in their work but similarly deal with the "messiness" or unruliness of sexual fantasies, identities and practices. As with Brad Rader in *Harry and Dickless Tom*, Macy's inclusions of various genders and hybrid bodies resonates with many of the

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[780] Padva, "Dreamboys," 596.
[781] Ibid.
[782] Ibid.
[783] Ibid.
[784] Ibid.

concerns of queer theory: the deconstruction of the gender binary, and the demonstration that sexual identities, desires and practices do not always line up neatly. Judith Butler, famously argues that gender is performative, "a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end." As such "an ongoing discursive practice," gender is "open to intervention and resignification."[785] Seeing gender as an ongoing process rather than a stable, fixed fact, opens up the possibility of "subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power . . . through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that keep gender in its place."[786]

According to Butler, "Intelligible" genders are "those which . . . institute and maintain relations of coherence among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire," and such "intelligible" gendered identities are produced "precisely through the regulatory practices" of "the matrix of coherent gender norms."[787] This cultural matrix "requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist'," including "those in which gender does not follow from sex" – that is, transgender, intersex and genderqueer people – and "those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" – gay men, lesbians and other sexual transgressors.[788] From within the domain of the heterosexual gender matrix, these "unintelligible" gender and sexual identities – what Deleuze and Guattari might call "a thousand tiny sexes"[789] – can only appear as "developmental failures or logical impossibilities." But "[t]heir persistence and proliferation" provides opportunities to "expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and . . . to open up . . . rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder."[790] The example of "disordering practices"[791] Butler famously focuses on is, of course, drag, which she argues demonstrates

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[785] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43.
[786] Ibid., 44.
[787] Ibid., 23.
[788] Ibid., 23-24.
[789] Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 213.
[790] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.
[791] Ibid.

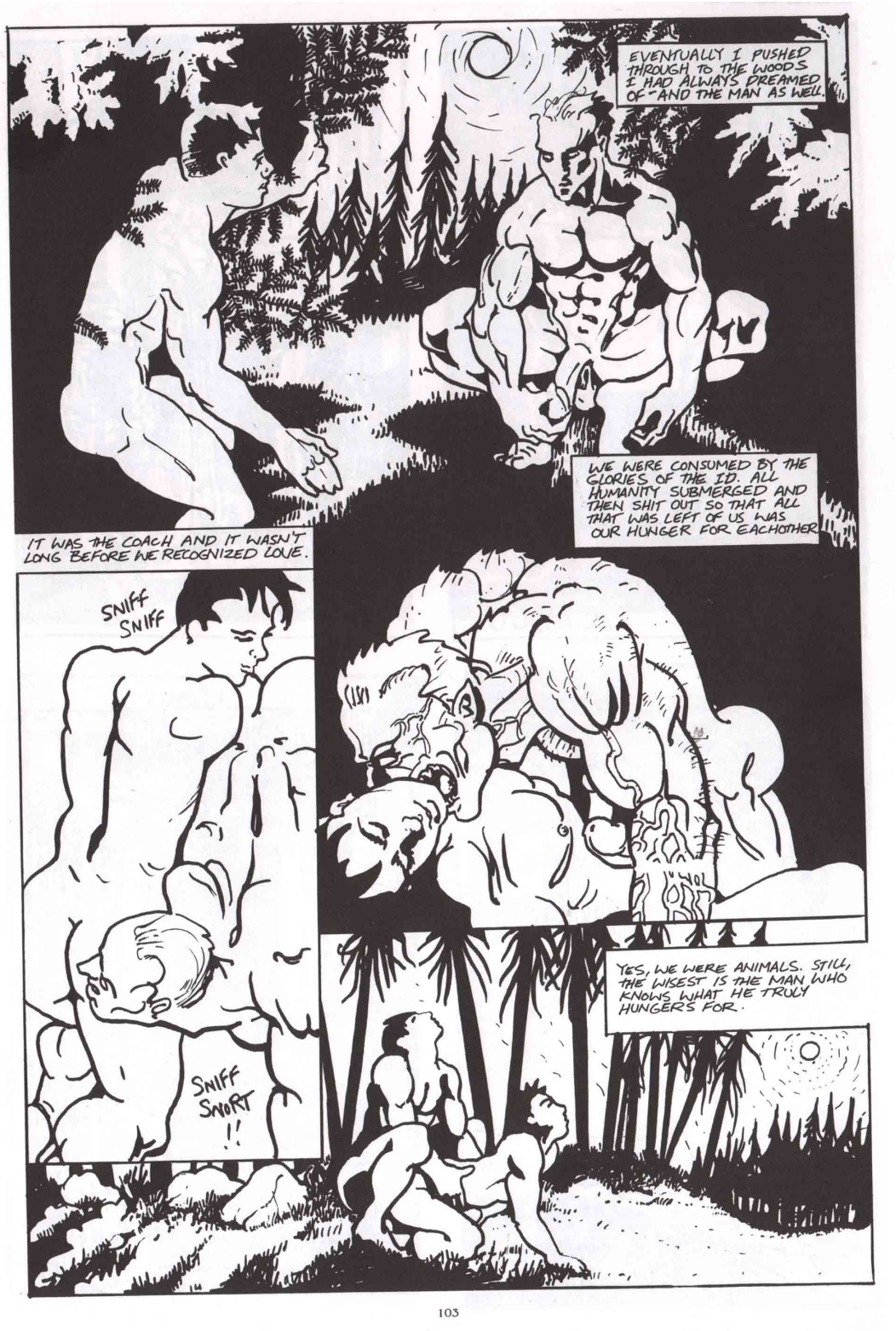

Fig. 6-18 – Jon Macy, "Tail." *Meatmen* Vol. 21, 103.

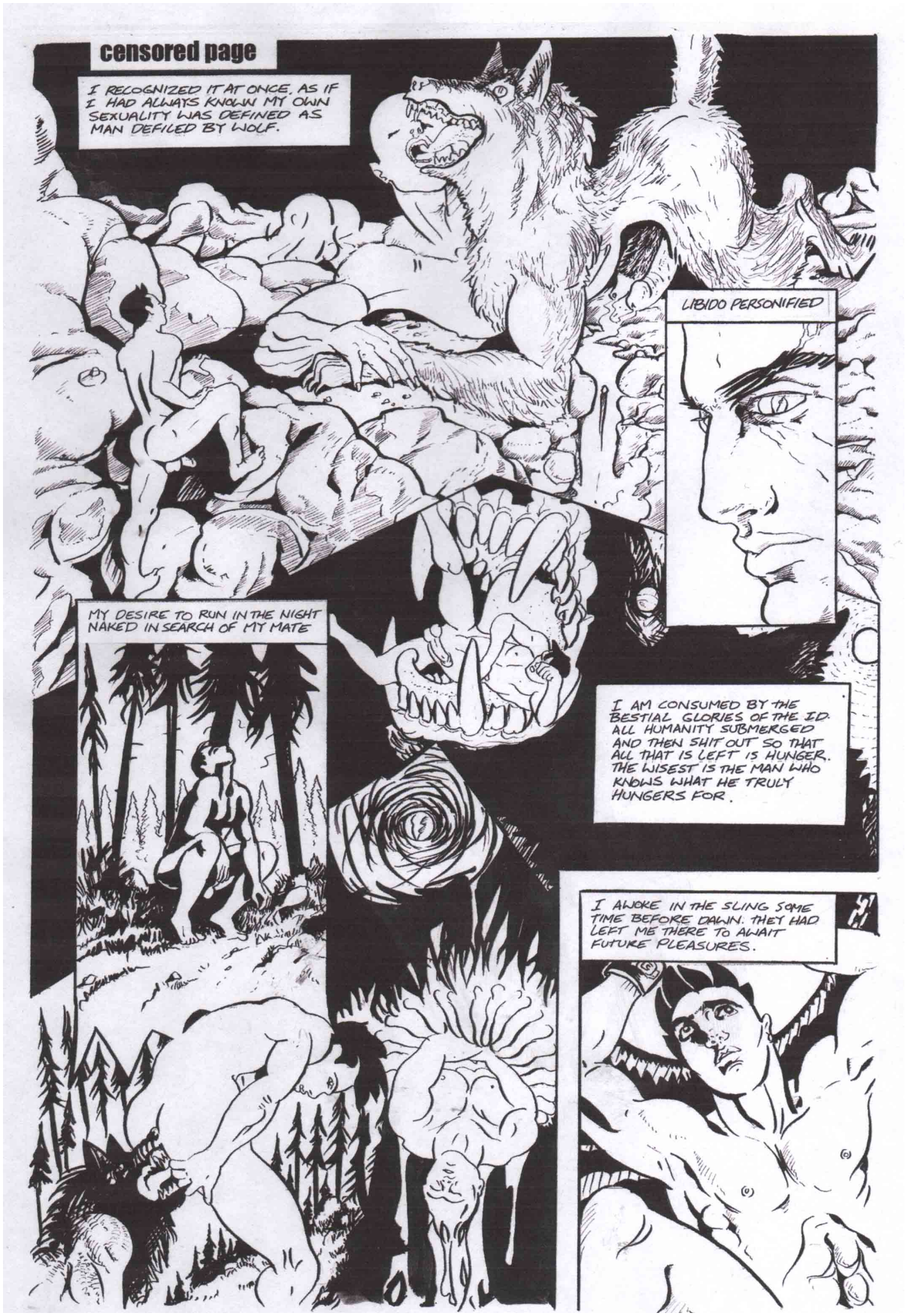

Fig. 6-19 – The censored, original last page of Macy's "Tail."

there is no authentic inner "core" to gender, and provides the opportunity to denaturalize all gender and sexual identities.

Similarly, in Macy's comics, the appearance of various hermaphrodites and "erotic monsters" serve to disrupt a supposedly stable gender binary system. In the comics, of course, these seemingly impossible or "unintelligible" bodies are generated not through cross-dressing or even through sex reassignment surgery, but through sexual intercourse itself. In Macy's comics, sex itself – especially queer sex – is represented as a magical force, a "disordering practice"[792] that warps the supposed "natural order," *literally* transforming the possibilities of normal life. Macy's representation of queer sexuality suggests it is something that, potentially at least, challenges, transforms and redefines what is "normal," "natural," or even possible.

Another form of hybridization in Macy's comics is the combination of human characteristics with those of animals – and especially wolves. Wolf/human hybrids appear in both *Fearful Hunter* and in the story "Tail." The published version of "Tail" ends with the "Wolf-boy" wandering through a bizarre erotic landscape until he eventually emerges into a moonlit woodland glade, where he meets the coach, whom he loves, and who has become like an animal (**Fig. 6-18**). However, this is somewhat different from Macy's original version which depicts the boy encountering a personification of his "own sexuality": a being with two heads, one human and one Wolf, which are locked in a passionate kiss (**Fig. 6-19**). Macy was asked to change the ending due to the publisher's fears of accusations of bestiality, but as he emphasizes, this image of the boy's sexual self as a human/animal hybrid, is a metaphor for self-love and self-understanding.[793]

Both of *Fearful Hunter*'s protagonists, Oisin and Byron, display animal-like characteristics at certain points in the series: Oisin appears with antlers at certain times, while Byron is a werewolf. As Philip A. Bernhardt-House describes, the figure of the werewolf "might be seen as a natural signifier for queerness in its myriad forms" because of its "hybridity and transgression of

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[792] Ibid.
[793] Macy, interview.

species boundaries in a unified figure."[794] The queerness of the werewolf carries connotations of homoeroticism and especially "the beastly, unnatural and atavistic natures often imputed to queer people," but the werewolf is equally "queer" in the sense of being a figure that "actively disrupts normativity, transgresses the boundaries of propriety, and interferes with the status quo in closed social and sexual systems."[795]

As Harry M. Benshoff notes, the werewolf is an example of the cinematic horror trope of "the seemingly 'normal' man who becomes a monster or has a hidden monstrous self,"[796] and one of "several iconographic queer monsters"[797] produced by Hollywood during the classical period. The homosexual undertones of these queer monsters "would become more and more prevalent as they were remade and adapted across the years,"[798] says Benshoff.

Macy's use of the werewolf is one of these adaptations, albeit outside of the world of Hollywood cinema that makes the figure's queer undertones explicit. Like the hermaphrodite figures in many of his comics, the hybrid animal/human characters in Macy's work are queer figures that challenge culturally-constructed binary oppositions between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized, and hetero and homo, as well as "intelligible" gender and sexual identities. They are produced magically through the disordering energy of queer sex itself.

Conclusion

Jon Macy's work exemplifies many of the elements of the gay alternative porno comics discussed in this chapter. These alternative erotic comics take up the conventions of the gay porno comics genre – idealized male bodies, explicit sex – and are certainly influenced by the older generation of gay erotic cartoonists

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[794] Philip A. Bernhardt-House, "The Werewolf as Queer, the Queer as Werewolf, and Queer Werewolves" in Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, *Queering the Non/Human*, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008, 159.
[795] Ibid.
[796] Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 48.
[797] Ibid., 47.
[798] Ibid.

including figures like Sean, The Hun, and particularly Tom of Finland. In Steve MacIsaac's words, alternative gay erotic cartoonists work "with *and* against Tom of Finland."[799] Alternative erotic comics depart from the conventions of the genre in a number of ways. Characters are presented as complex and "rounded," and sex – while shown explicitly and intended to be arousing – is also presented as part of a broader and more complicated narrative.

As part and parcel of this concern with complex identities and narratives, the alternative gay porno comics come to share many of the concerns of the alternative gay ghetto comics discussed in the previous chapter. In Macy's comics, as discussed, questions of the dogmatism and hierarchies within queer communities are returned to repeatedly, and queer communities are represented metaphorically. Davenport's *Feral and the Ghost Skater* spotlights characters who are part of a punky and alternative queer subculture. Rader's *Harry and Dickless Tom* is set outside of any gay community, concerned with characters who see themselves as heterosexual. Hall's and MacIsaac's stories, which are often set within gay communities, nevertheless represent a complicated and not always celebratory view of it.

Along with this somewhat sceptical view of gay community, then, comes a concern with showing the complexity of sexual identities, desires, and practices. This is done relatively straightforwardly in those comics set in the "real world." For example, in Justin Hall's true sex stories a gay male escort has a threesome with a married heterosexual couple. In comics like Brad Rader's *Harry and Dickless Tom*, BiL Sherman's stories, and Jon Macy's work, the complexity of sexual desire is shown metaphorically, through gender transformations, human/animal hybridity, sex with monsters or gods, and sex that has reality-altering effects.

Queer cartoonists who work with the gay porno genre and seek to create sexually exciting comics narratives, also work to explore the complex nature of sexuality, identity and community, emotions and relationships, in ways that broaden the possibilities of what gay porno comics can do. In the next chapter, however, I examine the work of those artists who do not choose to work with

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[799] Steve MacIsaac, interview.

the conventions of either gay porno or gay ghetto genres. I show how they eschew a straightforward representation of gay or queer sex or community, but nevertheless create narratives that challenge both heteronormative and conventional gay understandings of gender and sexual identity.

Chapter Seven: Beyond Gay Ghetto and Gay Porno Comics – Fox Bunnies and Sissy Boys

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed the work of Robert Kirby and Jon Macy, as examples of how alternative queer cartoonists respond to the conventions of the gay ghetto and the gay porno genres respectively. I showed that they take up many of the conventions of the two genres, but subvert them in both subtle and more obvious ways. In contrast with the mainstream gay ghetto comics, Robert Kirby, Michael Fahy and other cartoonists parody the conformist and consumerist character of the dominant gay habitus, focusing instead on the emotions and interrelationships of shy gay nerds, misfits and punks. With respect to the gay porno genre, artists like Jon Macy, Brad Rader, Justin Hall and Steve MacIsaac work "with and against" pornographic conventions, creating narratives that are sexually explicit and intended to arouse, but also creating more rounded characters and more emotionally complex narratives, and challenging normative and binaristic notions of sexuality and gender. These varied comics work more or less within the conventions of either the gay ghetto or the gay porno genre, but are concerned with the production of alternative representations of queer identities -- representations that to some extent resist the dominant gay male habitus portrayed in more mainstream gay ghetto and gay porno comics.

In this chapter, I discuss those gay alternative cartoonists that cannot be said to be working within either the conventions of the gay ghetto comic or the gay porno comics. These cartoonists sidestep the conventions of the gay ghetto comic, refusing to represent the gay community directly, and instead setting their stories outside of or away from the gay ghetto. They also evade the conventions of the gay porno genre as well, avoiding the explicit representation of gay sex and eschewing the depiction of idealized male bodies central to the genre's conventions. Sometimes the representation of the gay ghetto and gay sex is avoided by setting the comics in utterly fictional, fantastical locales, even more alien than the fantasy worlds evoked by Jon Macy or Dave Davenport discussed in the previous chapter. In other comics, gay ghetto and gay porno conventions are evaded by focusing on characters who are too young to

participate in gay social life, or who have not yet chosen to openly declare their sexual identity.

The approaches used by queer cartoonists who do not depict queer life directly are many and varied, and so instead of focusing on one main case study this chapter looks at several. I first examine the more fantastical approaches, focusing on the work of Andy Hartzell, particularly his graphic novel *Fox Bunny Funny*. I then move on to discuss comics which avoid the gay ghetto and gay porno strip's conventions by casting children and adolescents as their protagonists, focusing mainly on David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*.

I argue that setting their comics outside the trappings of either gay ghetto or gay porno conventions allows cartoonists like Hartzell, Kelly, and others to comment on the norms of both heterosexual, heteronormative culture, and the gay or queer community, in a variety of ways. In *Steven's Comics*, the protagonist's position as an effeminate and (proto)gay child allows Kelly to question the emphasis on masculinity in both heteronormative culture and – indirectly - in the dominant gay habitus. In *Fox Bunny Funny*, Hartzell tells a "coming out story" of sorts, but set in a completely alien environment, allowing Hartzell to ask questions about identity, conformity and liberation within both heteronormative and queer culture.

I first discuss a few of the other fantastic metaphors used by queer alternative cartoonists to talk indirectly about the gay community and queer identity. I then go on to discuss the career of Andy Hartzell, whose graphic novel *Fox Bunny Funny* is one of this chapter's main case studies.

Fantastic Metaphors

As I have already noted, some gay alternative comics avoid representing the gay ghetto by using fantastic settings and metaphors, often critiquing or commenting on the gay community more indirectly; there is an overlap here with many of the artists who work in a pornographic mode, such as Jon Macy, who as I have discussed in the previous chapter, uses the metaphors of insular institutions or secret societies to talk about the gay or queer community in his

work, particularly the School of Evil in *Nefarismo,* and the Druids in *Fearful Hunter*. Through such metaphors Macy repudiates contemporary queer culture as hierarchical and normative despite its own "outcast" status.

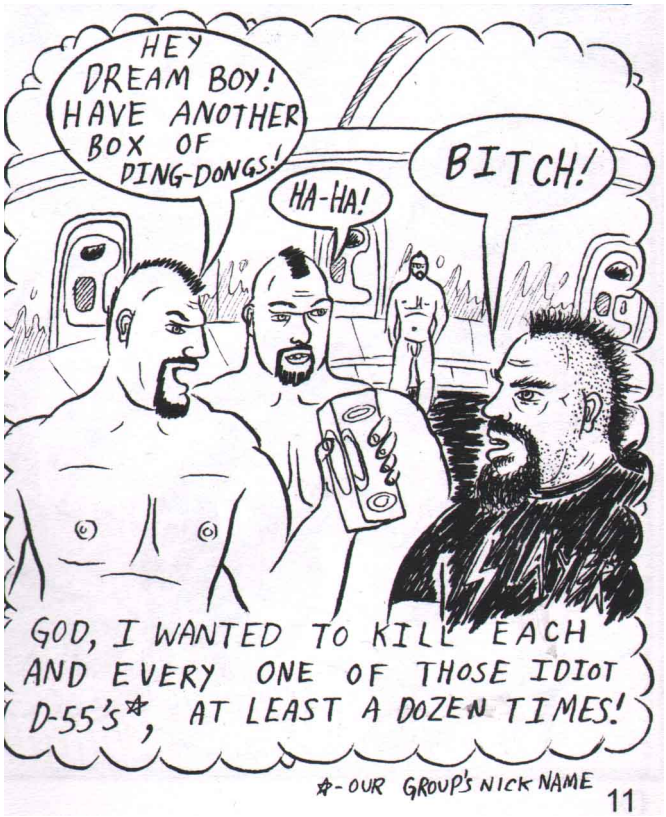

Fig. 7-1 – BiL Sherman, "The Ugly Slaveling." *Wanky Comics* no. 2, 11.

Similarly, BiL Sherman critiques the conformity of the gay community metaphorically in his story "The Ugly Slaveling,"[800] in which the central character – named Dream Boy - is one of a number of cloned sex slaves who live on a spacecraft. Dream Boy is "different" from the others: fatter, with a rather unkempt look and very hairy body, in contrast with his more groomed, muscular and hairless, clone "brothers", who tease him waspishly about enjoying chocolate (**Fig. 7-1**). "I see all these slaves as like everybody else on the gay scene,"[801] explains Sherman, while Dream Boy – an analogue for Sherman himself – is the "weird" outsider, and the art style Sherman employs –

[800] BiL Sherman, "The Ugly Slaveling", *Wanky Comics* no. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fear for the Folk), 5-14.
[801] BiL Sherman, interview with author, tape recording, Minneapolis, MN, 17th August 2008.

punkish, aggressive, and rough - eschews the slickness associated with (gay) consumer culture too.

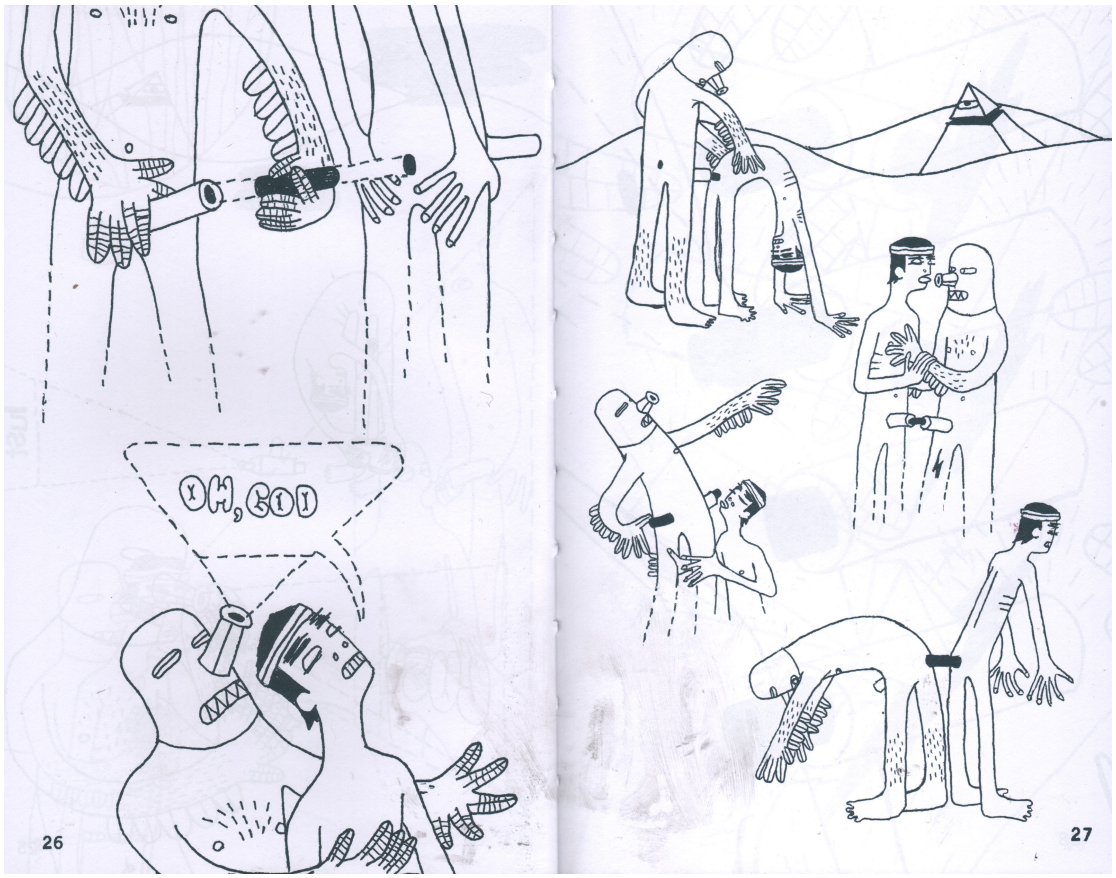

Fig. 7-2 – Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix*, 26-27.

Edie Fake's graphic novel *Gaylord Phoenix*,[802] published in 2010 by Secret Acres, collects his self-published series of comics of the same name along with previously unpublished material. Edie Fake - a gay-identified, female-to-male transgender cartoonist – describes Gaylord Phoenix as being about "a gay bird-man and his travels,"[803] a free-wheeling narrative in which the ambiguously-gendered protagonist – drawn with a male, hairy chest and a tube-like prosthetic penis - journeys through different magical realms in a quest for love and self-acceptance. The graphic novel is, formally at least, perhaps the most unconventional of the comics discussed thus far in this thesis. *Gaylord*

[802] Edie Fake, *Gaylord Phoenix* (New York: Secret Acres, 2010).
[803] Edie Fake interviewed in "Rad Queers: Edie Fake", dir. Graham Kolbeins, www.radqueers.com, accessed 5th March 2014, 23:00.

Phoenix mainly tells its story through images, with minimal dialogue; it often eschews panel borders, word balloons, and many of the other conventional devices used by comics artists; backgrounds are often either minimal or utterly abstract and highly-patterned, and rarely if at all naturalistic; and the narrative itself follows a dream-like (non-) logic, giving *Gaylord Phoenix*'s fictional world a truly alien quality. While there are scenes of sex (**Fig. 7-2**) and images that seem to operate as metaphors for gay and/or transgender experiences, Edie Fake's *Gaylord Phoenix* works very much outside of gay ghetto and gay porno genre conventions.

Fantastic metaphors, therefore, appeal to artists who want to comment on queer life and identity without being so bound by the conventions of gay cartooning's dominant genres. Having discussed a number of these artists briefly, I now turn to a discussion of the work of Andy Hartzell, whose *Fox Bunny Funny* is an unconventional narrative – completely wordless - set in a world of anthropomorphic foxes and rabbits.

Andy Hartzell

Like Sherman, Macy, and Fake, Andy Hartzell locates his stories in other times and fantastical places. In this section, I discuss Hartzell's comics career and some of his shorter comics narratives briefly, before going on in the following section to explore his graphic novel *Fox Bunny Funny* in more depth. Many of Hartzell's stories focus on the tensions and pleasures experienced by gay male couples *not* involved with a mainstream gay scene. Partly because of being in a relationship throughout his adult life, Hartzell often felt "a little bit peripheral"[804] with regard to gay culture.

Studying theatre at the University of Michigan, Hartzell became disillusioned with it, and simultaneously discovered the work of underground and alternative comics, which encouraged Hartzell to start writing and drawing his own comics. Hartzell realized that comics could be "a medium for self-

[804] Andy Hartzell, interview with author, tape recording, Berkeley, CA, 22nd July 2008.

expression and for telling idiosyncratic stories."[805] While still in college Hartzell did a comic strip titled *The Awkward Stage*, for a local gay newspaper, the *Ten Percent Review*. In 1991, Hartzell and his partner then went to Las Vegas, where Hartzell worked as a caricature artist; they eventually settled in the Bay Area. Attending the San Diego Comic-Con, Hartzell realized he could self-publish and sell his own comics at conventions, so he put together some mini-comics and began to sell them at San Diego and at APE (the Amateur Press Expo) in the Bay Area. Hartzell was awarded a Xeric Grant in 1995, which he used to self-publish his comic book *Bread and Circuses*.[806] In the latter part of the 1990s, he also produced a comic strip titled *Fool's Paradise*, published in a range of alternative newspapers, and in 1997 he began contributing work to Robert Kirby and David Kelly's anthology *Boy Trouble*.

Hartzell's stories often include elements of folklore and magic realism that serve to distance them from contemporary gay culture. "Unlike a lot of gay cartoonists artists who are really recording gay life as it is now lived," Hartzell says, his own stories "often have something of a fable, a metaphor, an allegorical kind of quality to them."[807] For example Hartzell's short story, "Dinner at Achmed's"[808] is largely set in an "Arabian Nights"-style fantasy version of the Middle East, while "Leaving the Beast"[809] is a queer version of the traditional fairytale "Beauty and the Beast", set in an unspecified, seemingly pre-modern place and time. In these narratives and others, Hartzell tells imperfect queer love stories, replete with bickering and dissatisfaction alongside romance and intimacy, set at a remove from the contemporary gay ghetto.

In 2007 Top Shelf Productions published Hartzell's graphic novel *Fox Bunny Funny*,[810] which can be seen as a "coming out story" of sorts and in this sense picks up on themes of sexual identity familiar from the gay ghetto genre.

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[805] Ibid.
[806] Andy Hartzell, *Bread and Circuses* (Berkeley, CA: Self-published, 1995).
[807] Hartzell, interview.
[808] Andy Hartzell, "Dinner at Achmed's," Boy Trouble no. 3, ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (Seattle, WA: DK Press, 1997). Reprinted in *The Book of Boy Trouble*, ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (San Francisco, CA: 2006), 100-105.
[809] Andy Hartzell, "Leaving the Beast," *Boy Trouble* no. 5, ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (Seattle, WA: DK Press, 2004), 31-42.
[810] Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2007).

However, Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* subverts these generic themes and conventions even more assertively than his other stories, as the graphic novel's narrative is set in an absolutely alien, utterly "Other" realm - a world populated solely by anthropomorphic foxes and bunnies. The fact that *Fox Bunny Funny* is a completely wordless comic narrative – unusual in LGBT and straight comics alike – underscores the ambiguous, alien qualities of its characters and setting.

Fox Bunny Funny

Fox Bunny Funny's narrative focuses on a young, unnamed fox who harbours a potentially subversive secret: he enjoys dressing up as a rabbit in private. The narrative is divided into three chapters, each structured around a series of reversals, with the young fox first becoming acculturated into the foxes' oppressive, bunny-hating culture, but eventually becoming exposed to another, transgressive realm where bunnies and foxes intermingle and exchange identities, and ultimately being surgically transformed into a bunny himself.

Hartzell employs a thick, firm black line throughout *Fox Bunny Funny* that means that his style in the book resembles woodcuts, making it bold, crisp and graphic, with strong contrasts between solid black and white areas. Hartzell draws in a style close to the far edge of cartooniness, with reference to Scott McCloud's "Big Triangle of Style", introduced in his influential study *Understanding Comics* and discussed in Chapter One. Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* could be placed toward the far right side of the Triangle's x-axis, close to where McCloud places other comics artists famous for their work in the "funny animal" comics genre. Hartzell's foxes and bunnies could be positioned, stylistically, closely to classic examples of the genre such as Pat Sullivan's *Felix the Cat* or Carl Barks' *Scrooge McDuck*. Indeed, could be said to employ what Cohn describes as "Barksian American Visual Language",[811] as discussed more fully in Chapter Four, or what Witek calls "the cartoon mode."[812] As Witek notes, "Comics in the cartoon mode are so strongly associated with anthropomorphic

[811] Cohn, *Visual Language*, 141-143.
[812] Witek, "Comics Modes", 29-30.

characters that humorous comics aimed at children have often been labeled 'funny animal comics,' even when the protagonists are straightforwardly depicted as human beings."[813]

As Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith have noted in their discussion of the funny animal genre, such comics, originally aimed primarily at young children, "often focused on some moral lesson: be kind to one's neighbours, always tell the truth,"[814] and so on. "The popularity of funny animal comics," as they write, "reached its highest levels during the 1940s and 1950s."[815] However, comics creators working both in the mainstream and the alternative comics movement have since employed the tropes of the funny animal genre to satirical ends. Prime examples include the Marvel Comics series *Howard the Duck*[816] and Dave Sim's *Cerebus the Aardvark.*[817]

Uses of the funny animal genre in English-language, LGBT-themed comics are relatively rare, the most prominent exception being Michael Goldberg's *Swishy Fishy* stories published in *Gay Comix* during the 1980s.[818] However, the *Swishy Fishy* series can be seen as examples of the gay ghetto comics genre "dressed" as a funny animal comic. Swishy is part of an undersea, piscine gay ghetto, and the strips playfully poke fun at, but ultimately affirm, the dominant gay habitus. The comics of French artist Patrick Marcel, some of which were printed in *Gay Comix* in the 1980s, sometimes feature the sexual and romantic adventures of an anthropomorphic fox and similarly are set in gay bars and clubs populated by various anthropomorphic characters.[819] Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* is somewhat different, not being set in anything like a "gay ghetto" for the majority of the book. Later in the book, when the protagonist does encounter a city which could be described as a "gay" or "queer ghetto" of a

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[813] Ibid., 29.
[814] Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics,* 208.
[815] Ibid.
[816] Steve Gerber (writer) and Val Mayerik (artist) created the character Howard the Duck for Marvel Comics in 1973. Marvel published *Howard the Duck* no. 1-31 between 1976 and 1979.
[817] Dave Sim, *Cerebus the Aardvark* no. 1-300 (Kitchener, Ontario: Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1977-2004).
[818] Michael Goldberg contributed *Swishy Fishy* stories and art to *Gay Comix* no. 7 (Spring 1986), 8 (Summer 1986), and 10 (Spring 1987).
[819] Patrick Marcel's anthropomorphic stories appeared in *Gay Comix* no. 3 (December 1982), 6 (Winter 1985), and 12 (Spring/Summer 1988).

kind, the narrative is far from straightforwardly affirmative of stereotypically gay preoccupations, as we will see.

The first chapter of the graphic novel introduces the alien world of *Fox Bunny Funny*, where anthropomorphic foxes and bunnies live in adjoining communities. The chapter begins as the protagonist rides his bicycle to the butcher's shop, passing a car with a roof-rack laden with dead bunny rabbits. His face in the third panel of page 3 registers shock and upset; we soon come to understand this reaction as out-of-keeping with the cultural norms of fox culture, which is quickly shown to be built around a view of foxes as naturally dominant, and superior in contrast with bunnies, who are regarded as the

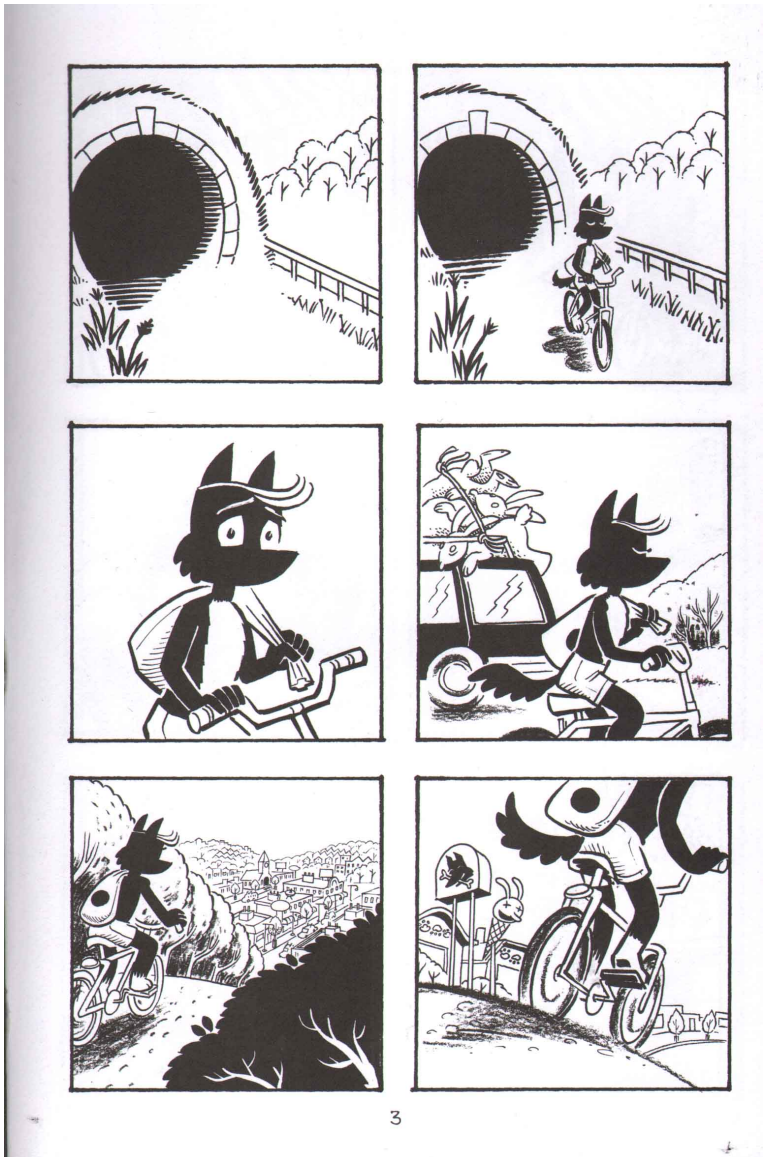

Fig. 7-3 – Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 3.

rightful prey of the foxes, existing only to provide them with sport and food. Smiling, dead bunny-heads adorn fast-food restaurants, and the foxes' movies and video games all reinforce their ideological superiority and the bunnies' inferiority (see **Fig. 7-3**).

Foxes and bunnies are represented in binary terms, echoing the binary construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality, of masculinity and femininity, of white skin and black skin – one normalized and glorified, the other rendered abnormal and accursed. The ordered and conformist nature of fox culture is echoed in the ordered organization of panels on nearly every page in *Fox Bunny Funny*: the images on all but the last page in Chapter 1, and on the majority of pages in each subsequent chapter, are organized in the form of a six-panel (two across, three down) grid. This configuration is only disrupted at moments of shock and disorientation, suggesting it is a deliberate formal choice on Hartzell's part in order to establish the rigidly conformist and normative character of the foxes' culture. As Charles Hatfield puts it, each panel in a comics narrative can be seen "as a moment in a sequence" and "in more holistic fashion, as a design element that contributes the overall balance (or in some cases the meaningful imbalance) of the layout."[820] In *Fox Bunny Funny,* Hartzell "exploit[s] format as a signifier in itself"[821] to communicate both the conformity of fox culture and the disorienting impact of its subversion.

The power and dominance of the foxes' culture depends on the representation of bunny culture as passive, weak and powerless (and on the bunnies' hegemonic acceptance of their disempowered position.) In a similar way, for many queer theorists, lesbian and gay identities stabilize heterosexuality's dominance by operating as a binary opposite against which heterosexuality defines itself: "Homosexuality is produced inside the dominant discourse of sexual difference as its necessary outside."[822] Whereas the foxes' culture is rigid, macho, and militaristic, the bunnies' culture is gentler, more peaceful, and shaped around a sense of victimhood.

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[820] Hatfield, *Alternative*, 52.
[821] Ibid.
[822] Diana Fuss, "Introduction", in her (ed.) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.

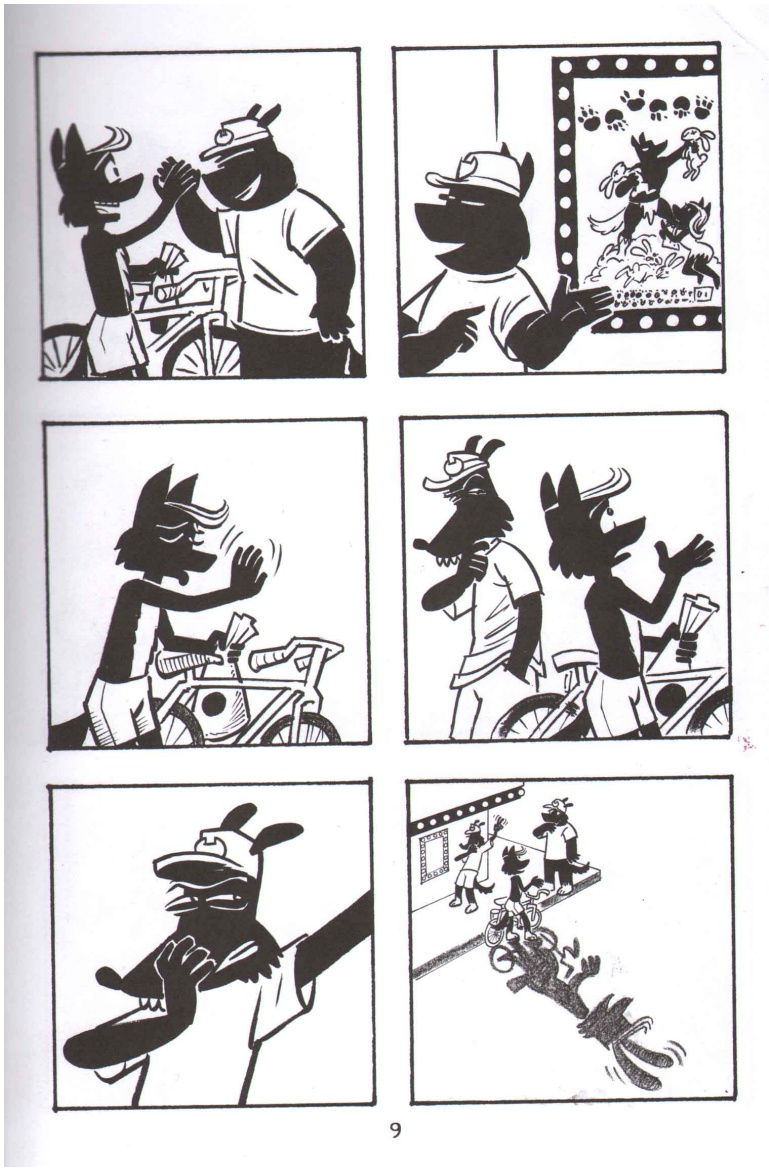

Fig. 7-4 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 9.

As the first chapter of *Fox Bunny Funny* continues we see more of the foxes' culture, and begin to suspect that the young protagonist harbours some sort of subversive secret. On his way home, the protagonist runs into another group of young foxes who lead him to a cinema, where they suggest going to see an action movie advertised by a poster showing a powerful male fox standing on top of a pile of dead bunnies while a female fox languishes at his feet.
The protagonist refuses to see the movie, prompting one of the other foxes to mock him, holding up two fingers above his head so that the shadow he casts resembles that of a bunny (as shown in panel 6, page 9 – see **Fig. 7-4**). This sort

of shaming echoes the way children and adolescents – particularly, perhaps, boys - seek to mock one another with epithets like “gay”, or through “sissy”, effeminate clowning. The theme of shame and the way such shameful feelings shape our identities runs through Fox Bunny Funny, and in many ways the story can be seen as archiving such shameful feelings in a similar way to Robert Kirby’s exploration of Drew’s shameful and difficult emotions, as discussed in Chapter Five, and Jon Macy’s portrayal of the protagonists of Fearful Hunter as negotiating fear and shame, as discussed in Chapter Six. The theme of shame also runs through David Kelly’s *Steven’s Comics*, which I will discuss in the next part of this chapter.

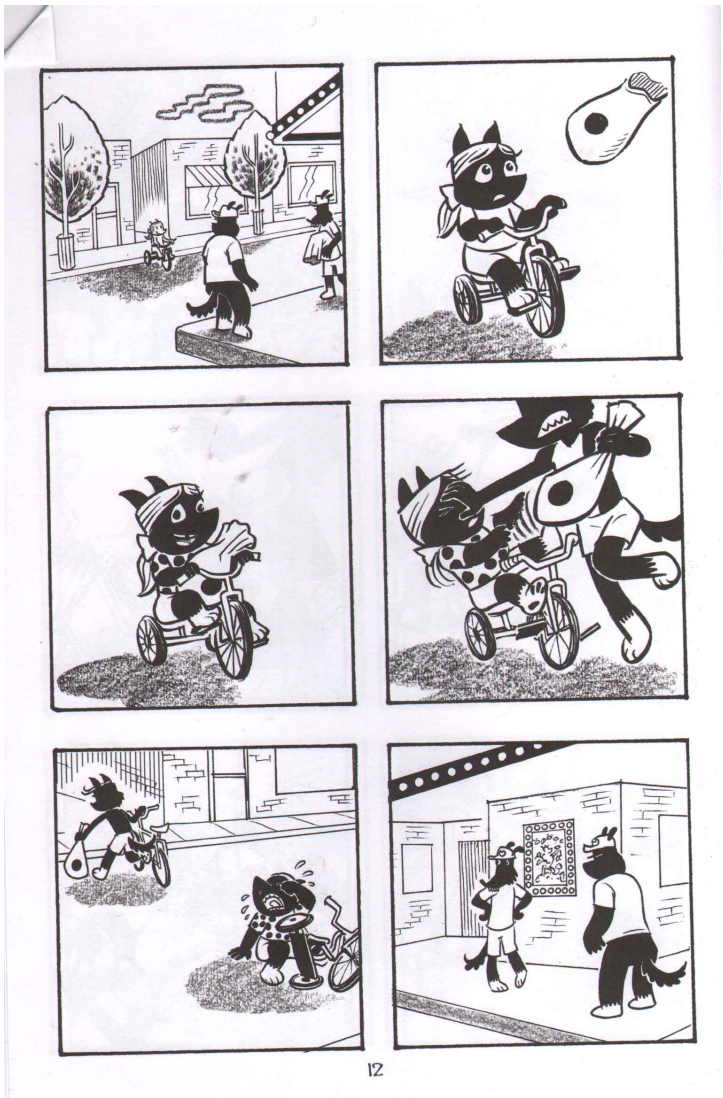

Fig. 7-5- Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 12.

When the young protagonist realizes he is being mocked he attempts to assert his "foxness" through a "macho" display of aggression, but this results in the other kids pushing him over, stealing his bag and throwing it back and forth. In the melee, the protagonist's bag ends up in the hands of a young female fox on a tricycle; he pushes the young fox girl over and takes back his bag, leaving her crying on the street (**Fig. 7-5**), an innocent victim of the violence inspired by what we might name "bunnyphobia" – a dread of a difference that metaphorically connotes a range of other differences, whether gendered, sexual, or racial.

Returning home, the protagonist hides the secret contents of his bag behind some bushes. At dinner, the protagonist's younger brother eats voraciously, playing aggressively with his food, which angers the protagonist, who excuses himself from the table and, on his way upstairs retrieves his bag from the bushes outside. After dinner, the protagonist's mother gets a call from a neighbour who seems very alarmed. The mother goes upstairs with trepidation, pausing and listening at her son's door over the last three panels of page 21 (**Fig. 7-6**), before opening the door to find the protagonist dressed in a bunny costume, jumping up and down in front of a mirror (**Fig. 7-7**). The shock of this discovery is underscored by the fact that this scene is depicted in a single panel positioned in the centre of *Fox Bunny Funny*'s 22nd page, the last page of Chapter 1 – in stark contrast to the six-panel grids of each preceding page. The expanse of white space around this small panel - and its deviation from the previously established "norm" of the six-panel grid - emphasizes the shock of this moment of the discovery of deviance, as well as the tension of what the consequences of this revelation might be.

The fox's bunny fetishism could be interpreted as a metaphor for transvestism, for same-sex desire, for a fascination and identification with an "Othered", subaltern ethnicity, or even for vegetarianism. Hartzell's use of this kind of complex metaphor prevents us from fully identifying *Fox Bunny Funny* definitively as a "gay coming out story", issuing a challenge to the conventions of the gay ghetto genre, its familiar tropes and character types.

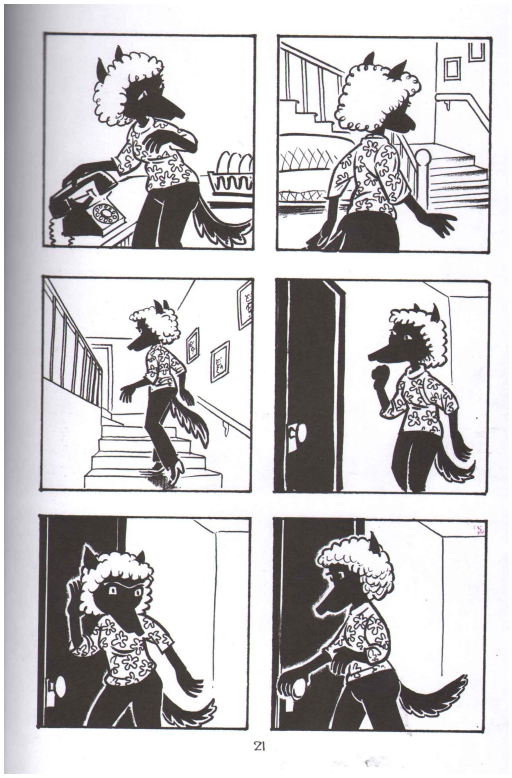

Fig. 7-6 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 21.

Fig. 7-7 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 22.

As Diana Fuss points out with regard to the hetero/homo binary, "[t]he fear of the homo . . . continually *rubs up against* the hetero", carrying with it the "ever-present threat of a collapse of boundaries."[823] The "bunny fetishism" practiced by Hartzell's fox protagonist poses such a threat to the foxes' society. In the second chapter we see that he has been sent to a sort of re-education camp where he is taught to be a marksman, and ultimately accompanies a group of other foxes on a marauding expedition to the city of the bunnies.

At the beginning of this marauding expedition Hartzell makes another significant adjustment to his previously very ordered arrangement of panels – where previously the gutters between panels had been left blank, white, from page 36 through page 51 the gutters are inked a solid black, signalling the ominous nature of the atrocities to come in this segment of the graphic novel. The foxes are depicted slaughtering bunnies; appalled by such atrocities, the protagonist wanders off by himself (**Fig. 7-8**), through a bunny graveyard, and into a chapel. The iconography of the chapel depicts a stern, powerful bunny – halo-like flames above his head and his chest emblazoned with a Sacred Heart – standing triumphant over the corpse of a fox.

Falling asleep, the protagonist finds himself surrounded and borne aloft by a flock of bunnies with skull-like faces; that this is some kind of dream or vision is signalled by the wavy lines, white against the black of the gutters, employed by Hartzell for the panel borders on pages 48 through 51. The spirit-bunnies summon a fearsome celestial bunny who swallows the young fox, who finds himself transformed into a bunny and welcomed by the spirit-bunnies (**Fig. 7-9**). The young fox awakes on page 52 and the panel gutters return to plain white, seemingly signifying that the threat of violence has passed. He finds that a peaceful religious ceremony is taking place in the bunny chapel, and ends up dancing joyously with the bunnies. However, when the other foxes discover him, he turns against his new bunny friends, devouring all of them. The other foxes turn to each other, relieved, as a close-up on the protagonist's face in the final panel of Chapter 2 – looking maniacally ecstatic – suggests that he has fully embraced the brutal and violent norms of his culture (**Fig. 7-10**).

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[823] Ibid., 6.

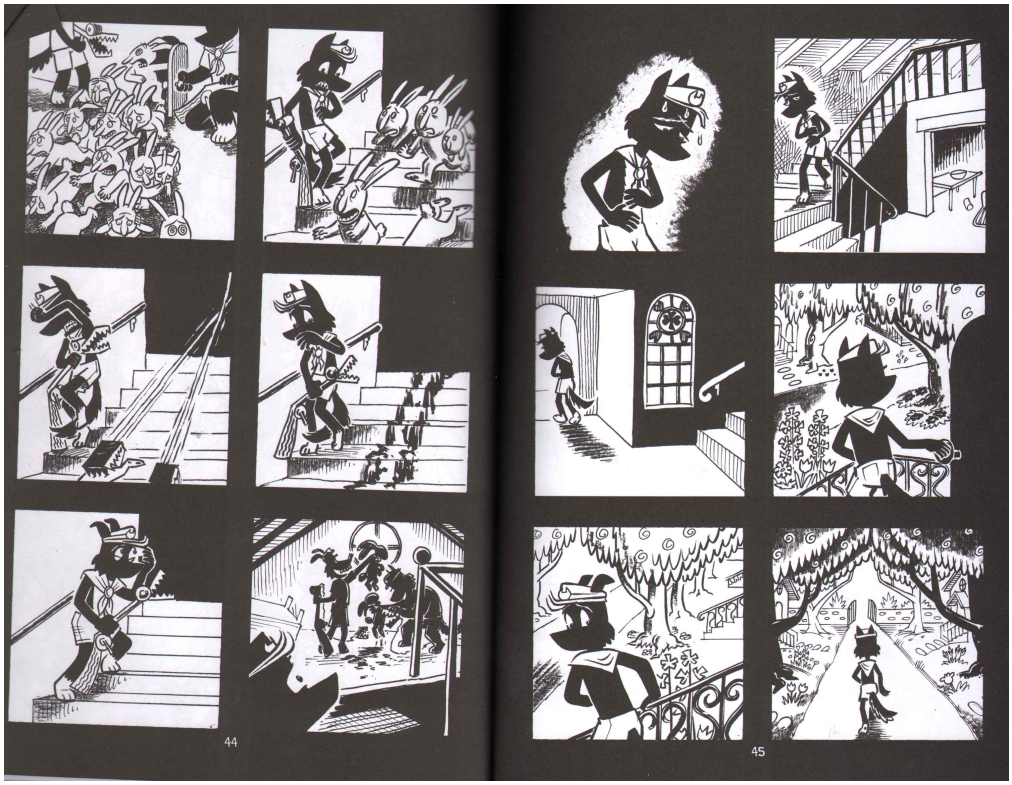

Fig. 7-8 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 44-45.

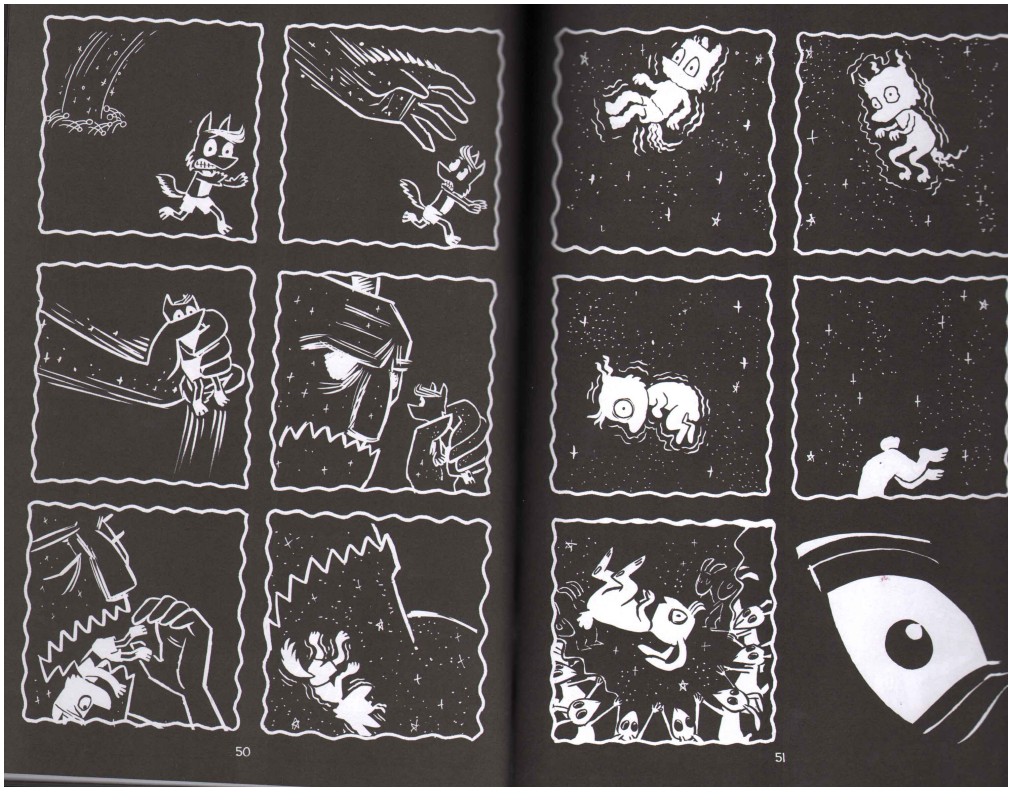

Fig. 7-9 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 50-51.

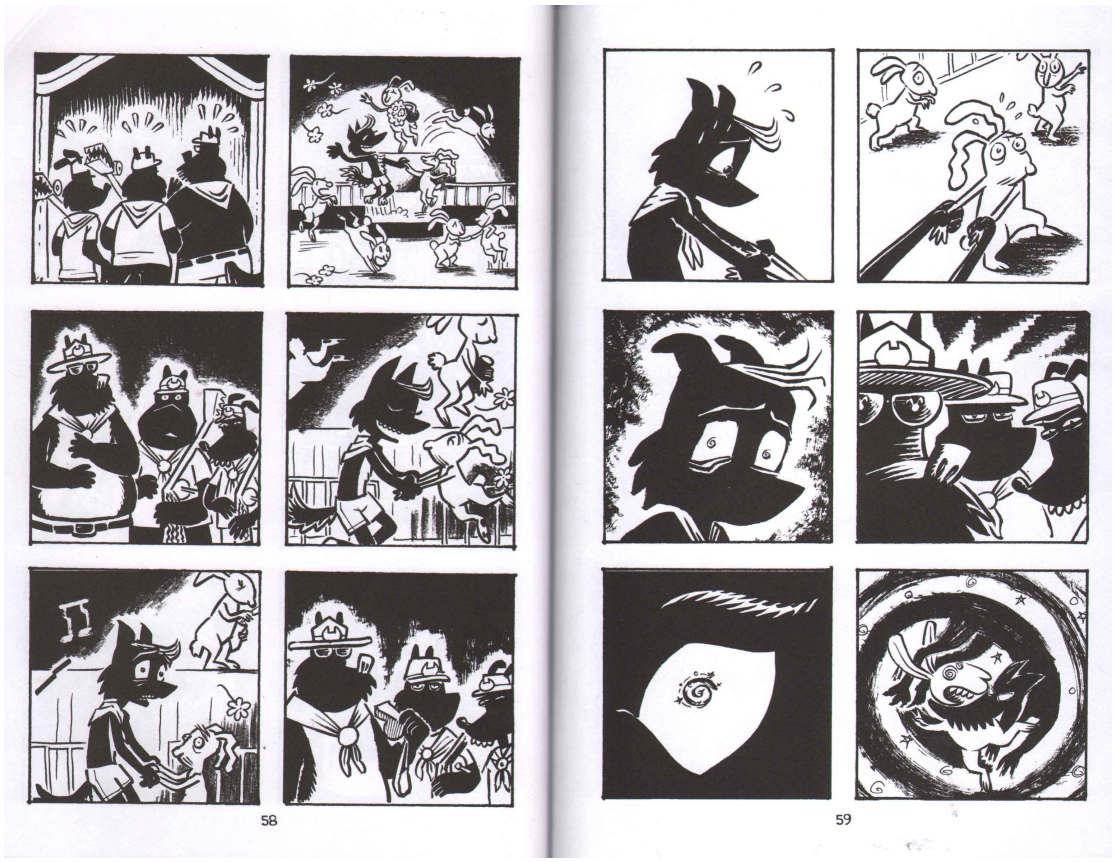

Fig. 7-10 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 58-60.

In the third and final chapter, the protagonist is shown as a grown adult fox, living alone, his house adorned with trophies glorifying his kills: he has seemingly achieved successful "foxish" acculturation. One night the protagonist's home is visited by a strange figure that could either be a fox or a bunny; this trickster-like character lures him out into the wilderness where he falls into a river which flows into a dark tunnel, which in turn leads to a ladder.

The protagonist is portrayed following the trickster up a ladder in a sequence of six panels – the now-familiar six-panel grid - on page 78 of *Fox Bunny Funny*. The subsequent seven pages suspend the use of the six-panel grid again in favour of a variety of different configurations. Page 79 depicts the protagonist in the centre of an almost entirely white space, emerging from a square-shaped hole in the ground; he gazes bewildered about himself (**Fig. 7-11**). Though we do not yet see what he sees, the shock on his face and the

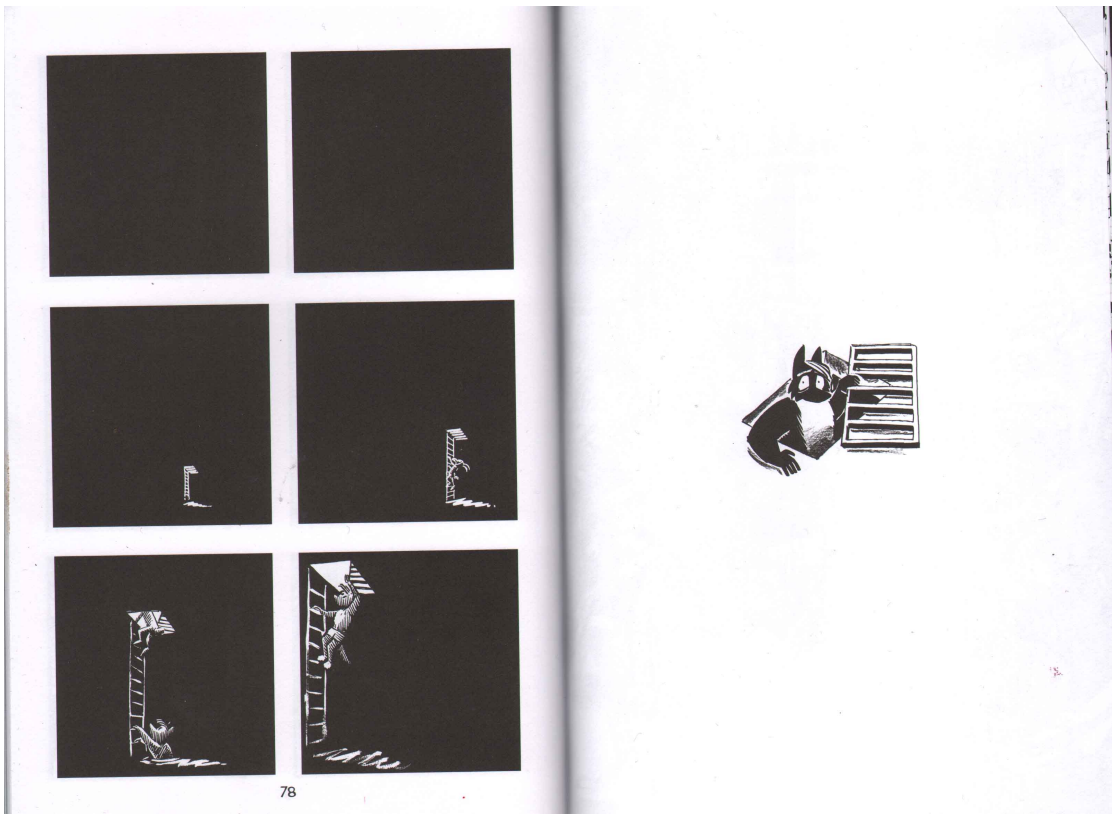

Fig. 7-11 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 78-79.

Fig. 7-12 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 80-81.

disruption of the six-panel grid echoes page 22 of the book, in which a single panel in the centre of the page underscored the shock of the young protagonists discovery by his mother in bunny "drag."

Pages 80 and 81 (**Fig 7-12**) show us what the protagonist sees: a city in which all manner of transgressions across the fox/bunny binary are taking place. Foxes and bunnies live alongside one another, and undergo various kinds of body modifications so that they become weird hybrids of one another. Pages 82 and 83 (**Fig 7-13**) comprise another panoramic splash panel in which we are shown a bird's eye view of the city. In pages 84 and 85 (**Fig 7-14**) the protagonist wanders viewing the transgressions of its denizens, depicted in panels which tumble across the two pages, mimicking the protagonist's own sense of bewilderment, fear and disorientation.

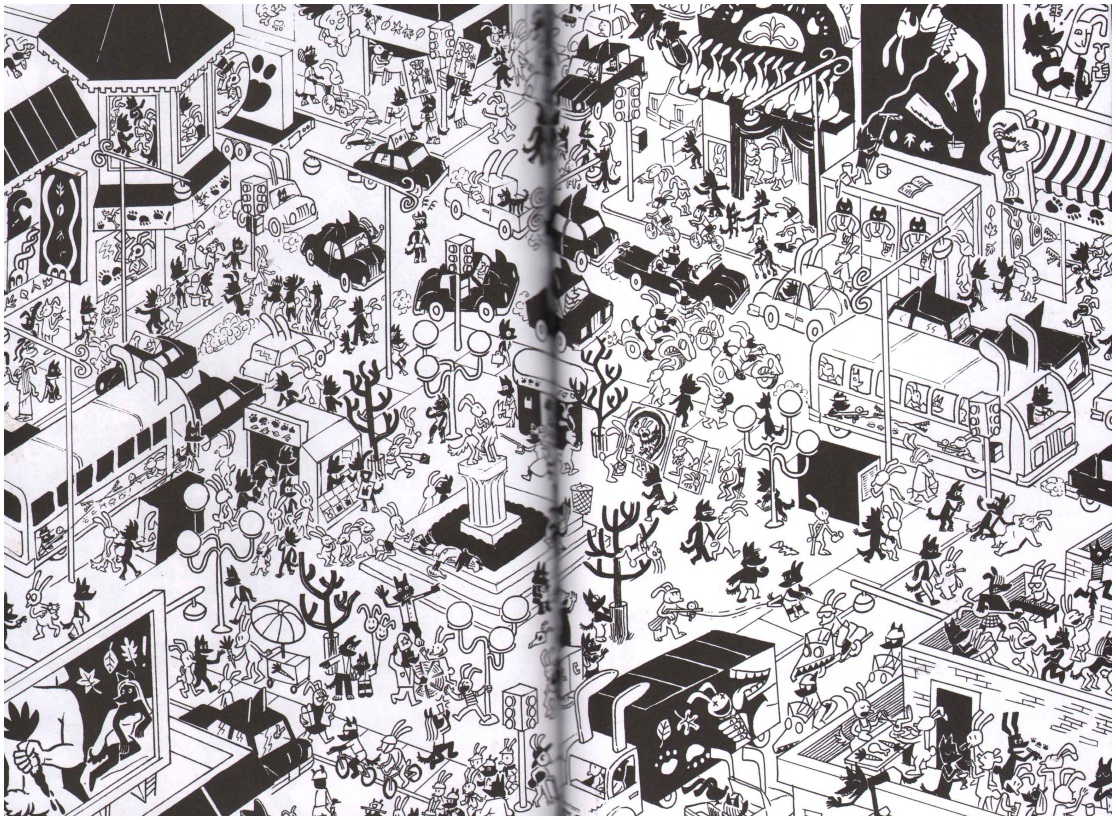

Fig. 7-13 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 82-83.

Fig . 7-14 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 84-85.

The practices of the denizens of the fox/bunny city denaturalize the identity categories of "bunny" and "fox", blurring and deconstructing the boundaries between these identities and recalling the work of Judith Butler on gender. As discussed in Chapter Six, Butler famously argues that "gender" does not follow from biological "sex", but is *performative*, a sequence of reiterated speech and body acts limited and constrained by social discourses. Fox and bunny identity too, would seem to be constructed and reinforced performatively in *Fox Bunny Funny* – through acts of both symbolic aggression and actual violence. While the protagonist fails to perform his fox identity successfully early on in the graphic novel (refusing to watch the film, failing to win the video games), by the end of Chapter 2 he has successfully, performatively "become" a fox.

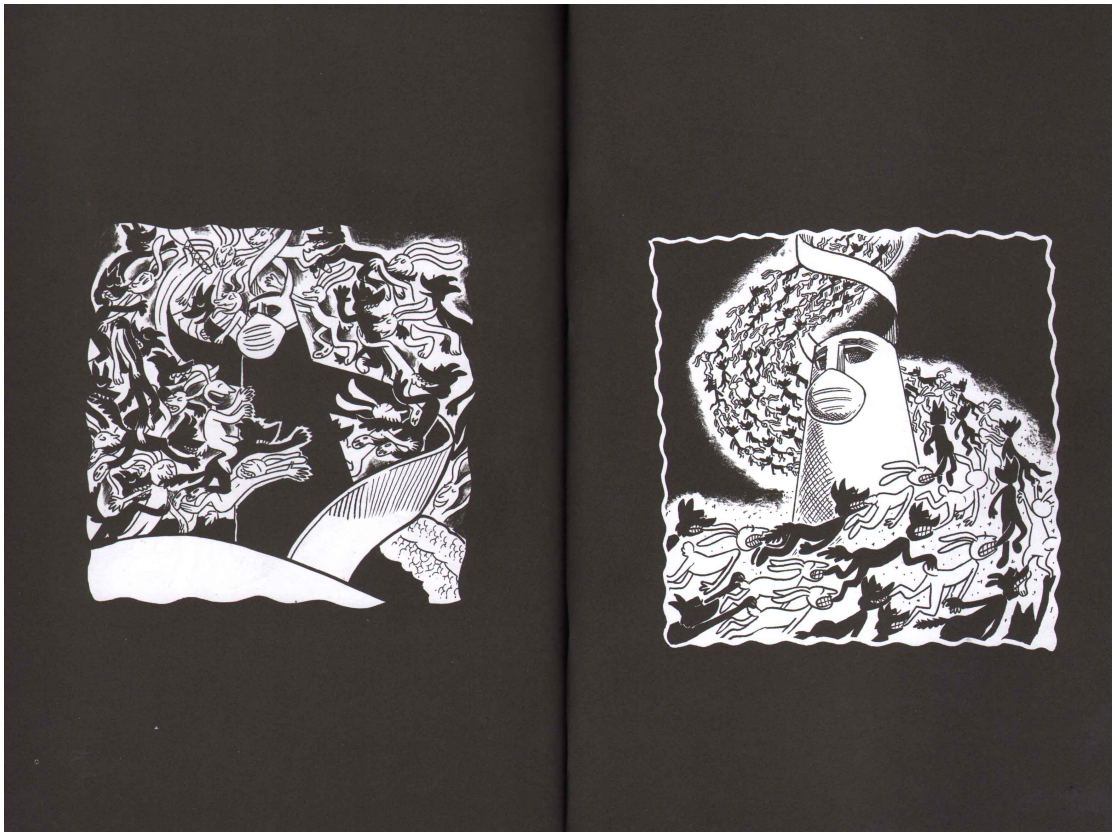

Fig. 7-15 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 96-97.

Butler argues that while repeated performative acts "congeal over time"[824] to produce the appearance of gender, there is in fact no authentic "core" to gender - it "is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[825] Butler argues it is possible to "repeat" gender in ways that might call into question that supposed "naturalness" of normative heterosexual identities, famously focusing on drag, which she argues "*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.*"[826] For Butler, the theatricality of drag provides an opportunity to denaturalize all heterosexual identities; the denizens of the fox/bunny city similarly denaturalize both fox *and* bunny identities through their varied, drag-like practices that parody the norms of both the foxes and the bunnies.

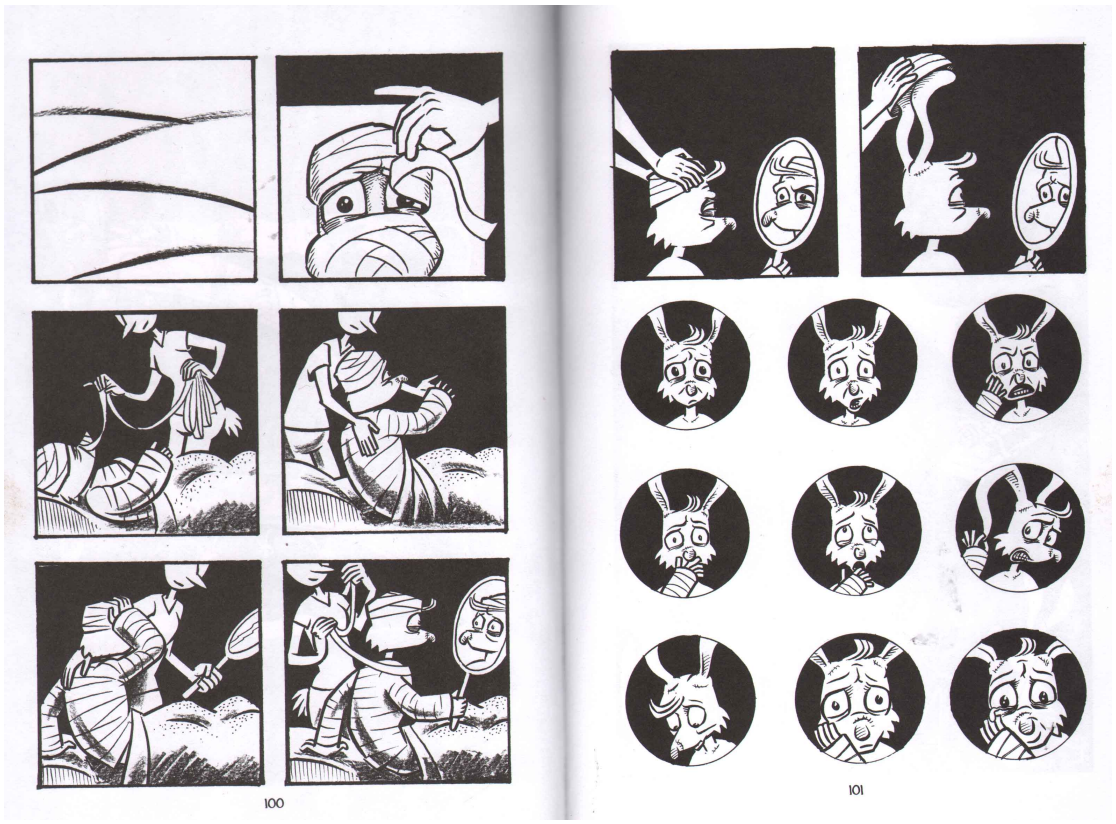

Fig 7-16 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 100-101.

[824] Ibid., 43-4.
[825] Ibid., 33.
[826] Ibid., 174.

Overwhelmed by this world in which the boundaries between foxes and bunnies have dissolved, the protagonist collapses in the street, and is taken to a hospital; the arrangement of panels largely reverts back to the six-panel grid at this point. Carted into a surgery room with an audience, he is subjected to an operation; pages 93 through 99 change the format of panels again, each page consisting of a large square panel against an expanse of black. These seven pages depict the operation and also the interior of the protagonist's psyche: as he is operated on in front of an audience of foxes and bunnies, we see the doctor and audience begin to transform, increasingly frenetically, the bunny doctor's body beginning to resemble a giant test tube while his ears twist, forming a DNA helix, while in the background the fox and bunny audience transform into swirling molecules, combining and recombining (**Fig. 7-15**).

The protagonist emerges at the end of this sequence, wrapped in bandages, and when the bandages are removed we see that he has been re-made into a scarred and sutured-up, grotesque "Frankenbunny". *Fox Bunny Funny*'s penultimate page shows the protagonist regarding his new reflection in a circular hand-mirror – the first two panels are square, conforming to the top two panels in the familiar six-panel grid, but are followed by nine small circular panels – evoking the hand-mirror – which show us what the protagonist sees, his new reflection, which he seems to regard with shock, anger, thoughtfulness, and then a mixture of happiness and sorrow (**Fig. 7-16**). The book's final page – a full-page splash panel – shows the protagonist weeping and laughing as he regards himself in a hand-mirror and the audience applauds (**Fig. 7-17**). The lack of words throughout *Fox Bunny Funny* mean that ultimately, the question of whether this ending is the protagonist's apotheosis or not, is left open to the reader's interpretation.

As Hartzell explains, *Fox Bunny Funny* was motivated by a feeling of frustration that, as gay culture has become more accepted, gay identities and narratives of coming out have become more rigidly defined and clichéd: "There are so many tropes that are not really examined anymore," explains Hartzell,

> because all the assumptions about them, about what has value and what doesn't have value, and what's good and bad, are so defined that I

wanted to tell a story where all of the same story points, the same kinds of experiences, seemed new because they were seen as something foreign.[827]

Setting his story in a totally alien culture was "a way to get people to think about questions of identity and accepting yourself, or following your desires as opposed to being acculturated into your cultural norms, that didn't

Fig . 7-17 - Andy Hartzell, *Fox Bunny Funny*, 102.

[827] Hartzell, interview.

seem so pat as all the [existing] stories about those themes are."[828] While *Fox Bunny Funny* is a book that is very much about sexuality it is also, as Hartzell describes, "very unerotic because it's portraying an alien eros."[829] This contrasts of course with the way artists such as Macy use fantastic metaphors in a decidedly erotic manner in their work, as seen in the previous chapter.

The fox/bunny city can obviously be understood metaphorically as a kind of gay, or queer, ghetto; however, while appealing in contrast with the rigid and oppressive fox society, this chaotic fox/bunny city is not quite presented as an unproblematic Utopia in the way that Chelsea or The Castro might be in more conventional gay ghetto-based comics. While many foxes and bunnies seem to co-mingle and live happily side-by-side there are also scenes of degradation and exploitation. As already mentioned, in one scene a fat, overfed bunny devours a fox, served up by another fox, in an expensive restaurant. Outside, in a back alley, a malnourished fox gnaws on the corpse of a small bunny. In another scene, two foxes are shown talking with a bunny; one fox has bunny ears while the other has a bunny tail, and the bunny is wearing a fox weapon (normally used to kill bunnies) as an adornment for her ears. Their body language is flamboyant and ebullient, and the bunny's clothes resemble a stereotypical prostitute's: fishnet stockings, black high-heeled thigh-boots.

But whether the foxes' and bunnies' adornments and modifications should be interpreted as empowering re-appropriations of stereotypes – parodies that undermine the notion of an original, as Butler might put it - or simply another kind of self-oppressive, fashionable conformity, is left open to the reader to ponder. Similarly, the fox's final transformation into a bunny takes place against his will, and whether his entry into the fox/bunny "ghetto" should be understood as liberation or conformity ultimately remains ambiguous.

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[828] Ibid.
[829] Ibid.

Youth and Childhood

In this section, I discuss comics that evade the gay ghetto strip's conventions by casting children and adolescents as their protagonists, and setting the action in suburban family homes, in schoolyards, and at teenage rock music gigs. These strips eschew the conventions of the gay ghetto genre, and critique the dominant habitus of the gay cultural field simply by not representing the "gay community" at all. In such strips, the protagonists are completely or almost completely cut off from a gay community or culture – either because they are young, shy, and still more or less in the closet, as in Tony Arena's *The Non-Adventures of Wayne* and Craig Bostick's vignettes in *Boy Trouble*, or, as in the case of the protagonist of David Kelly's *Stephen's Comics*, simply because they are too young (Steven is roughly ten years old).

In strips like these there is no gay community in evidence at all. Distance from the "gay ghetto" is achieved by totally locating the strips outside of a gay context. This in itself is as a statement on the part of the cartoonists, a rejection of the "gay ghetto" comics sub-genre. As discussed in my Introduction, Edward Sewell argues that queer comic strips ought to represent openly queer characters in distinctly queer spaces, or else run the risk of "assimilating" their characters into heteronormative culture. However, it is not the case that the queer characters in these strips are being "assimilated" or their sexual specificity erased. The queer characters' presence in a "straight" world must be seen firstly as an acknowledgment of a relatively stable "fact" of LGBT existence – the majority of queer people are not raised within queer families, and in their early, formative years are for the most part cut off from any models of queer/gay identity. Further, for a variety of complex personal reasons some gay people, may not choose to completely adopt a gay lifestyle or habitus that would then locate them unequivocally in a "gay world." This may indeed partly have to do with feelings of shame, or with practical and economic realities; or it may have to do, as much as these things, with having a preference for many aspects of one's life – one's friends and alliances, tastes and aspirations - that are not related to one's sexuality.

In comics like Tony Arena's *The Non-Adventures of Wayne*, Craig Bostick's short stories, and David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*, youth and childhood are represented potentially as "temporary autonomous zones", temporary spaces of relative freedom, where young males are – at least in some sense - free to express feelings and engage in sexual behavior which is not (yet) censured because it has not (yet) been named and classified as "gay". The term "temporary autonomous zone" or "TAZ" is derived from the writings of anarchist theorist Hakim Bey, who describes the socio-political tactic of creating temporary spaces that elude formal structures of control yet do "not engage directly with the State", instead "liberat[ing] an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolv[ing] itself to re-from elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it."[830] Bey's promotion of the TAZ as a political strategy may be a romanticized one, but the representation of youth as a kind of "TAZ" in these queer comics is not overly-romanticized or idealized: if the autonomous zone of youth and as-yet-unlabelled desire is temporary, it is also partial and tenuous. Characters still suffer from homophobic disapproval and harassment, and from the pains and disappointments that may come with clandestine desires and encounters.

To some extent, the characters in Arena's *The Non-Adventures of Wayne* or in Bostick's short stories feel more or less happy and "at home" in their lives, which are not necessarily "officially gay" lives. The queer punk boys who are the protagonists of Arena's and Bostick's strips often seem to be the only "gay" characters in their group of friends and subcultural scenes. Going to punk shows or playing in bands is clearly more satisfying for these characters than, say, moving to San Francisco, joining a gym and hanging out on the Castro – participating in the dominant gay habitus.

Arena's and Bostick's comics often pinpoint moments of tension, uncertainty and erotic contact between male friends who are involved in ostensibly "straight" subcultural scenes, and whose sexuality may not yet have been avowed or "pinned down". These stories are mainly concerned with

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[830] Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Second edition (New York: Autonomedia, 2003), 99.

adolescent boys who have not (yet) adopted or unambiguously declared a sexual identity, suggesting something about the confines and the limitations of sexual identity categories such as "gay", "straight" or "queer." The milieus these characters inhabit are confining – they are assumed to be heterosexual, and for the most part cannot articulate their desires even to their closest friends – but at the same time, because of the lack of avowed identity categories, the characters sometimes find themselves free to act in a curiously "liberated" manner, engaging in erotic contact with other males.

In Arena's "Wayne Gets Groped"[831] for example the title character – a closeted young punk - is aggressively and anonymously fondled by another man at a punk rock gig. Similarly, in many of Bostick's strips, boys who are actively heterosexual may feel "free" enough to also have (clandestine) affairs with other boys, precisely because these feelings and acts are not required to be named and categorized as "gay" – or at least, not *yet*. Adolescence, then, is portrayed in these comics as a sort of temporary zone of sexual license. These practices are neither represented as self-evidently "good" or "bad" – in some ways pleasurable, they are sometimes the source of a great deal of pain for these characters. Wayne's experience of being groped, for example, unleashes a variety of conflicting emotions ranging from sexual excitement to shame, a sense of being violated, and feelings of self-loathing (**Fig. 7-18**). Arena's style melds elements of the naturalistic and the cartoon modes; the slightly awkward, naïve quality of some of Arena's figure-drawing, and its punky spontaneity and energy matches the awkwardness of the story's protagonist and his punk milieu.

In other strips, the lack of fixed identity categories in this adolescent "TAZ" is a source of pleasurable, playful experimentation. The playfulness and simplicity of Bostick's crisp, graphic, cartoony drawing style in the story "Whiskey and a Haircut"[832] matches the playfulness of the narrative. The story's

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[831] Tony Arena, "Wayne Gets Groped," *The Best of Boy Trouble, Vol. 2*, ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (San Francisco, CA: Green Candy Press), 60-65.
[832] Craig Bostick, "Whiskey and a Haircut," *The Best of Boy Trouble, Vol. 2*, ed. Robert Kirby and David Kelly (San Francisco, CA: Green Candy Press), 92-96.

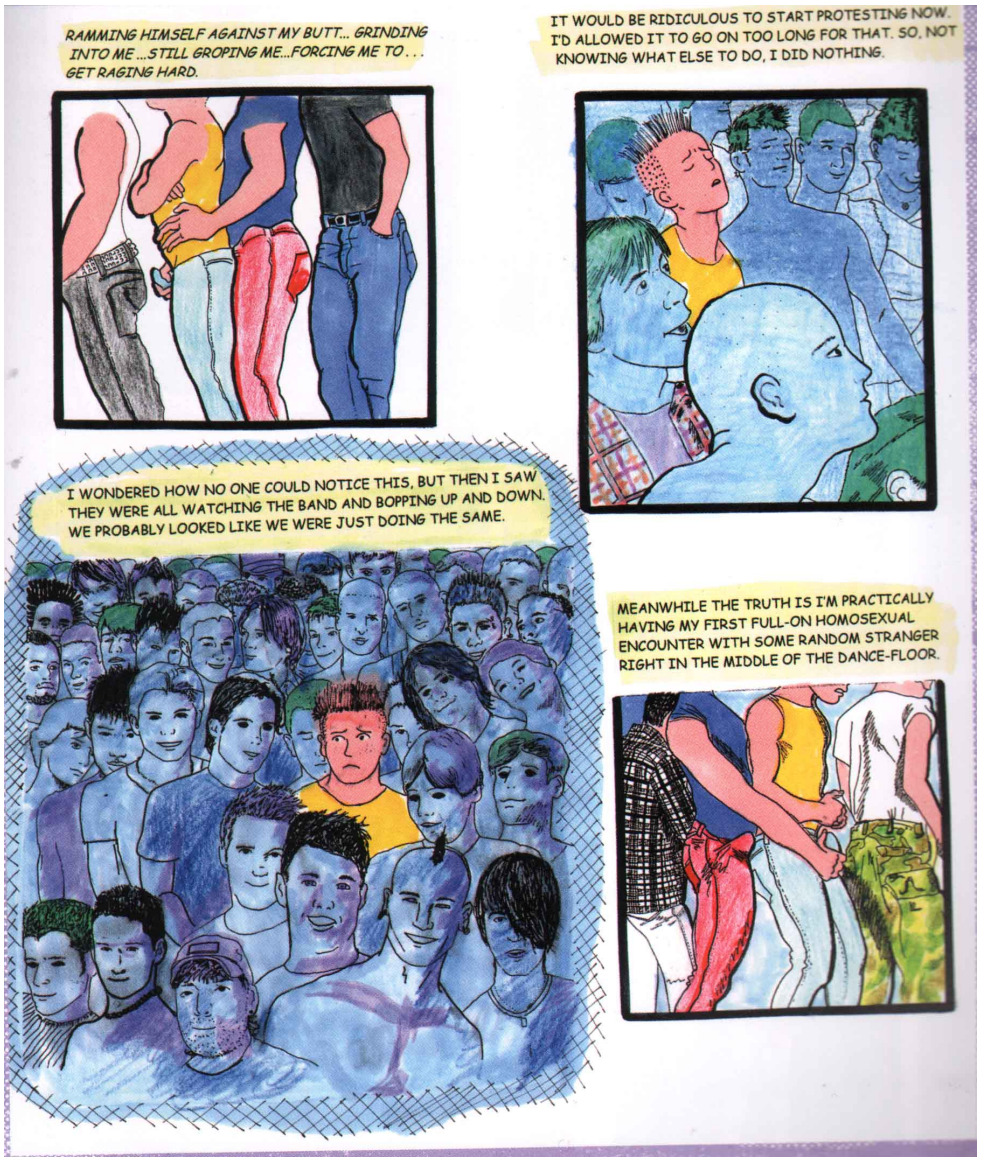

Fig. 7-18 – Tony Arena, "Wayne Gets Groped." *The Book of Boy Trouble, Vol. 2*, 63.

narrator meets his bandmate's cousin Bill, a bass guitarist, at an impromptu party thrown by Bill's girlfriend; the narrator offers Bill a Cheeto and then sticks it halfway into his own mouth, "implying that in order for Bill to get his half he'd almost have to kiss me." Bill doesn't hesitate, and his girlfriend makes them do it a few more times so she can take pictures (**Fig. 7-19**). The story's narrator gets to know Bill better a few weeks later, during a road trip to the city where

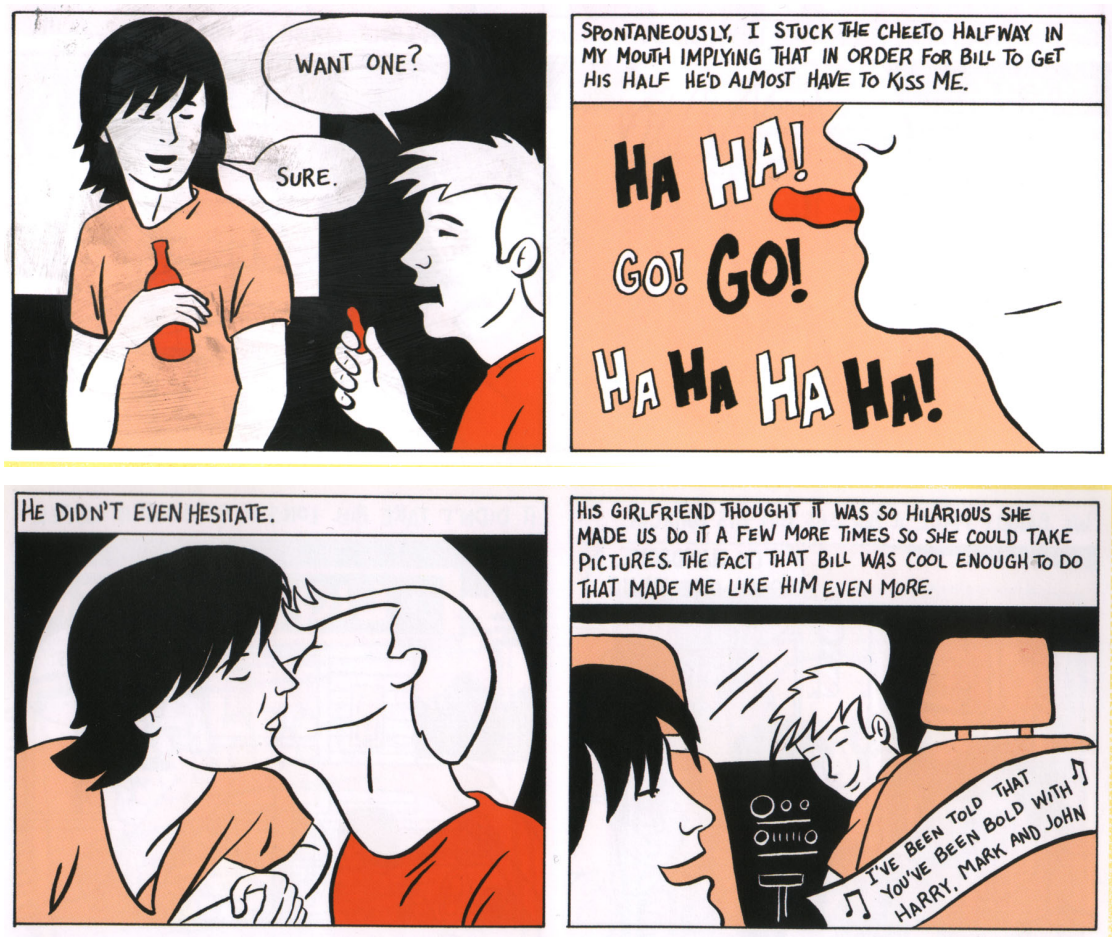

Fig. 7-19 – Craig Bostick, selected panels from "Whiskey and a Haircut." *The Book of Boy Trouble, Vol. 2*, 94-95.

Bill wants to sell one of his bass guitars; at one point Bill buys Cheetos and offers one to the narrator by sticking one halfway into his *own* mouth, obviously enjoying this kind of playful, carnival-like, temporary transgression of sexual borders, permissible because of the characters' ages and their immersion in a punk rock milieu with a relatively fluid sense of sexual identity categories.

While erotic contact is a feature of both Tony Arena and Craig Bostick's comics, discussed here, neither set of strips can be said to belong to the gay porno genre. Neither features explicit sex scenes or the kinds of sexually idealized bodies conventional to the genre. Even further away from the gay porno comics genre, and from the gay ghetto genre, are the *Steven's Comics* strips by David Kelly. In the next section, I discuss Kelly's cartooning career before turning, in the section that follows it, to a more in-depth discussion of *Steven's Comics*. The eponymous Steven is a creative, sensitive, and roughly 10-year-old boy growing up in 1970s America. "Sissy" and aware of his attraction

to other boys, Steven is nonetheless cut off from any sense of wider "gay community" because of his age. Through the figure of Steven, as we shall see, David Kelly critiques both the view of male femininity as shameful in the "heterosexual world", and also challenges what queer theorist Thomas Piontek has described as the gay community's "betray[al of] the sissy boy".[833]

David Kelly

As a child himself, David Kelly was exposed to comics by an older brother who collected them; Kelly drew his first comic when he was roughly ten, focused on the adventures of a Wonder Woman-like character named Starwoman. Kelly destroyed his early Starwoman comic as "it was discovered by my younger brother and his friends, and I think I was really embarrassed about it, especially because it was a woman and not some big muscle guy."[834] Both childhood creativity and the shame surrounding gender-nonconformity are themes Kelly would pick up on years later in his *Steven's Comics*, which he started producing in 1994. Kelly remembers the early 1990s as a "radical time period" associated with groups like ACT-UP, and credits the queer activism of the time with emboldening him to write *Steven's Comics*. Originally done as a series of strips that Kelly sent to various alternative and gay newspapers, in Fall 1994 Kelly compiled a number of the strips into a ten-page mini-comic, *Steven's Comics* no. 1. Kelly began corresponding with Robert Kirby and with the second issue of *Boy Trouble* (Summer 1995) became co-editor.

Kelly describes himself as not "really the type to go out to bars",[835] and somewhat uncomfortable with the mainstream gay scene; the gay ghetto is nowhere in evidence in *Steven's Comics*. "I think that's really what attracted me to *Boy Trouble* too," says Kelly, "when I saw the first issue, it wasn't 'mainstream gay' like what was depicted in the *Gay Comics* [series] at the time that Andy Mangels edited it."[836] Kelly says that he identified with the kinds of emotions

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[833] Piontek, *Queering,* 54.
[834] David Kelly, interviewed with author, tape recording, March 5th 2009, telephone interview.
[835] Ibid.
[836] Ibid.

portrayed in comics like Robert Kirby's and Michael Fahy's which presented gay characters and stories in a way that felt "more real,"[837] as opposed to the Andy Mangels-edited *Gay Comics* which to Kelly felt "manufactured."[838]

Between 1994 and 1997 Kelly published four issues of *Steven's Comics*,[839] whilst continuing to co-edit *Boy Trouble* with Robert Kirby into the 21st century. Kelly has also contributed comics to Robert Kirby's *THREE*, in collaboration with Craig Bostick. In 2011, queer independent comics publisher Northwest Press released a complete collection of *Steven's Comics* titled *Rainy Day Recess.*[840] *Rainy Day Recess* (hereafter *RDR*), the collected *Steven's Comics*, reads as a kind of graphic novel or collection of interrelated short stories about the central character, and constitutes the main case study discussed in-depth in the next section.

Steven's Comics

In David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*, the title character is a creative, sensitive boy, roughly 10 years old, who comes from an often-unhappy family. Steven experiences bullying and ostracization from many of his schoolmates, as well as hostility even within his family, but derives some comfort and happiness (as well as confusion) from the crushes he has on other boys, and from his passionate relationship with female pop culture icons such as Wonder Woman.

David Kelly's *Steven's Comics* could be placed right-of-centre on the x-axis of McCloud's Big Triangle of Style; Kelly employs what Witek describes as the "cartoon mode" and his style could be described as a variety of Cohn's "Barksian AVL." His approach to drawing characters captures subtle emotional nuances in facial expression and body language, even as it remains broadly stylized, with Steven particularly rendered in a simplified, schematic way. In the early strips Kelly's line is tentative and rather sketchy, while in later stories it is

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[837] Ibid.
[838] Ibid.
[839] David Kelly, *Steven's Comics* no. 1-4 (Seattle, WA: DK Press, 1994-1997).
[840] David Kelly, *Rainy Day Recess: The Complete Steven's Comics* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2011).

more firm and assured, his panels more detailed, filled with cross-hatching and shading. In both the earlier and later stories Steven's face is rendered without a lot of detail, Kelly employing simple dots for Steven's eyes, and yet the way his eyebrows and body language is drawn works to communicate emotions economically and effectively, encouraging reader empathy and perhaps identification; indeed McCloud suggests more simplified comics styles encourage greater identification since "the more cartoony a face is, the more people it could be said to describe."[841] Emotions are fundamental to the narrative of *Steven's Comics*: Each episode is narrated by Steven, the events filtered through his emotions.

Steven is a "sissy boy" – mocked for his "feminine" tastes – and also a proto-gay child, aware of his attraction to other boys, though he cannot yet articulate these desires. Because of his age, Steven is cut off from the concept of any kind of "gay community." Moreover, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it, the gay movement "has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys."[842] Thomas Piontek argues that the gay movement and gay theory itself have "betrayed the sissy boy"[843] because of this failure to attend to his concerns and because of gay culture's emphasis on the masculine gay image. Indeed the 1970s – the time period in which *Steven's Comics* is set – marked the beginning of gay male culture's rejection of "the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual" and fashioning of the hyper-masculine "clone" look.[844] This of course was of course a reaction against long-standing stereotypes of the effeminate homosexual male, created in the nineteenth century with the conceptualization of homosexuality as "inversion", arising from a mismatch between physiological sex and psychological gender.[845] Gay Liberation opposed this psychiatric pathologization of homosexuality, arguing that it contributed to the oppression of lesbians and gay men, and insisted that "one woman, *as a*

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[841] McCloud, *Understanding*, 31.
[842] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 157.
[843] Piontek, *Queering,* 54.
[844] Ibid.
[845] Michel Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 43.

woman, might desire another; that one man, *as a man*, might desire another."[846] However, making such then-subversive assertions has seemed to require a de-emphasis of the links between gender-nonconforming children and gay adults.

In 1973, in response to gay and lesbian activists' efforts, the American Psychiatric Association made their "decision to drop the pathologizing diagnosis of homosexuality"[847] from the next edition of the manual, the *DSM-III*. However, the *DSM-III*, the first edition of the *Manual* to *not* to contain an entry for homosexuality, is also the first to contain an entry for Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood (GID). Sedgwick sees the creation of GID as the first strike in what she terms "the war on effeminate boys."[848]

Although putatively gender-neutral, the diagnosis of GID is in fact "highly differential between boys and girls".[849] While a girl is branded with this pathologizing label "only in the rare case of asserting that she actually is anatomically male",[850] a boy can be treated for GID if he displays a simple preference, or as the *DSM-III* puts it, a "preoccupation" with stereotypically feminine activities "as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls."[851] Whereas the decision to remove homosexuality from *DSM-III* was highly publicized, the addition of GID appears to have attracted no attention from gay activists, "nor even to have been perceived as part of the same conceptual shift".[852]

In psychiatrist Richard Green's book *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality*, he claims there is a "linkage between boyhood 'femininity' and manhood homosexuality."[853] Piontek points out that some psychiatrists – despite the official depathologization of homosexuality – see "the diagnosis of GID as a means to identify and treat 'prehomosexual' children and

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[846] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 157.
[847] Ibid., 154.
[848] Ibid.
[849] Ibid., 156.
[850] Ibid.
[851] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd edition, Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 265-66.
[852] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 157.
[853] Richard Green, *The "Sissy Boy Syndrome" and the Development of Homosexuality* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 370.

thus prevent adult homosexuality."[854] For Piontek, the gay movement and gay theory's failure to challenge psychiatry's new introduction of the GID diagnosis is a betrayal of the sissy boy linked to the emphasis on a hypermasculine image in gay male culture that goes back to the 1970s and early 1980s.

"In an effort to throw off the social stigma of being sissies or failed men",[855] gay men adopted the "clone" look and its accompanying "masculine" sexual behaviour so as to assert that they were as much "real men" as were heterosexual men. The clone "combined exaggerated elements of traditional (that is, working-class, heterosexual) masculinity to fashion a new kind of gay masculinity that signalled his sexual interest in men"[856] and as Piontek asserts, "[a]dherence to the clone aesthetic was frequently a matter less of choice than of maintaining one's sexual attractiveness."[857]

Indeed, even today, "masculinity" – in terms of appearance, mannerisms, and sexual behaviour - is central to the dominant gay habitus shaped in part by gay media culture. As discussed in Chapter Three, this emphasis on masculinity can also be found in the types of gay bodies portrayed as desirable in gay ghetto and gay porno comics. It is also evident in personal ads in magazines and on the Internet, where gay men say they are seeking "straight-acting and –appearing" partners while dismissing "fats and fems." For Piontek, this illustrates "the extent to which some gay men have internalized homophobia and demonized femininity."[858]

This repudiation of gay male femininity is echoed by psychiatric discourses which consider a traditionally masculine gay man "to have an integrated and well-adjusted personality,"[859] judging gay men's mental health according to their successful masculine socialization and their similarity to heterosexual men. As Sedgwick writes, the "healthy homosexual" is seen as "one who (a) is already grown up and (b) acts masculine."[860] The so-called

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[854] Piontek, *Queering,* 55.
[855] Ibid., 58.
[856] Ibid.
[857] Ibid., 58-59.
[858] Ibid., 59.
[859] Ibid.
[860] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 156.

"psychiatry of gay acceptance" then, relegates effeminate adult gay men to a marginal, stigmatized position, but also denies "any continuity between the gender-nonconforming child and gay adult, between the sissy boy and the macho gay man."[861]

This view leaves no space for conceiving of the feminine gay boy as anything other than abject: "the haunting abject",[862] in Sedgwick's words, of gay theory and politics itself. Sedgwick describes this abjection as "especially horrifying"[863] if, as Piontek writes, to effect social change, many gay men have felt obliged "to renounce parts of themselves . . . by denying the fact that effeminate boys can and do grow up to be gay men."[864] Moreover, the suppression of gay male femininity is often seen as a prerequisite for gay men's enjoyment of gay social and sexual life, as convincingly (hyper-)masculine appearance and behaviour are deemed so important to participation in the dominant gay habitus of successful cruising and sex.

Piontek argues that the sissy boy is "a queer border dweller who points toward alternatives to the binary thinking that has structured gay thought."[865] Focusing on a *child* protagonist, David Kelly removes his queer comic from the conventions of the gay ghetto and gay porno comics genres, issuing a challenge to the stereotypes of the dominant gay habitus. Focusing specifically on a *"sissy boy"* protagonist, Kelly challenges mainstream gay male culture's marginalization and stigmatization of effeminate adult men, too. Through Steven, Kelly also critiques heterosexual society's rigid, normative expectations of gendered behaviour: His tastes are ridiculed as "sissy", causing him a great deal of emotional turmoil, which in turn provokes destructive behaviour in Steven – there is a parallel here, of course, to Hartzell's fox protagonist, who takes out his aggression on a younger female fox when mocked as "bunnyish" by his male contemporaries.

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[861] Piontek, *Queering,* 60.
[862] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 157.
[863] Ibid.
[864] Piontek, *Queering,* 61.
[865] Ibid.

The first issue of *Steven's Comics* largely deals with Steven's desire for a Wonder Woman doll which he has noticed out of a row of male "action figures" including Captain America and Superman at the Fred Meyer store. In a strip titled "Wonder Woman" (**Fig. 7-20**), Steven narrates his fascination with this doll and his desire to own it. The first panel in this instalment depicts Steven's hand holding the box containing the Wonder Woman doll, priced $2.99, the super-heroine's face smiling benevolently: "She was so pretty" Steven's narrative caption above the panel reads. Putatively, each episode of *Steven's Comics* is a comic-strip "letter" drawn and written by "Steven" to the reader; the drawing style Kelly employs – in some ways schematic, messy - captures the energy and exuberance of youth, particularly "Steven's" drawing of the super-heroine's face, surrounded by stars and lines signifying rays of golden light, signifies his enthusiasm for the character.

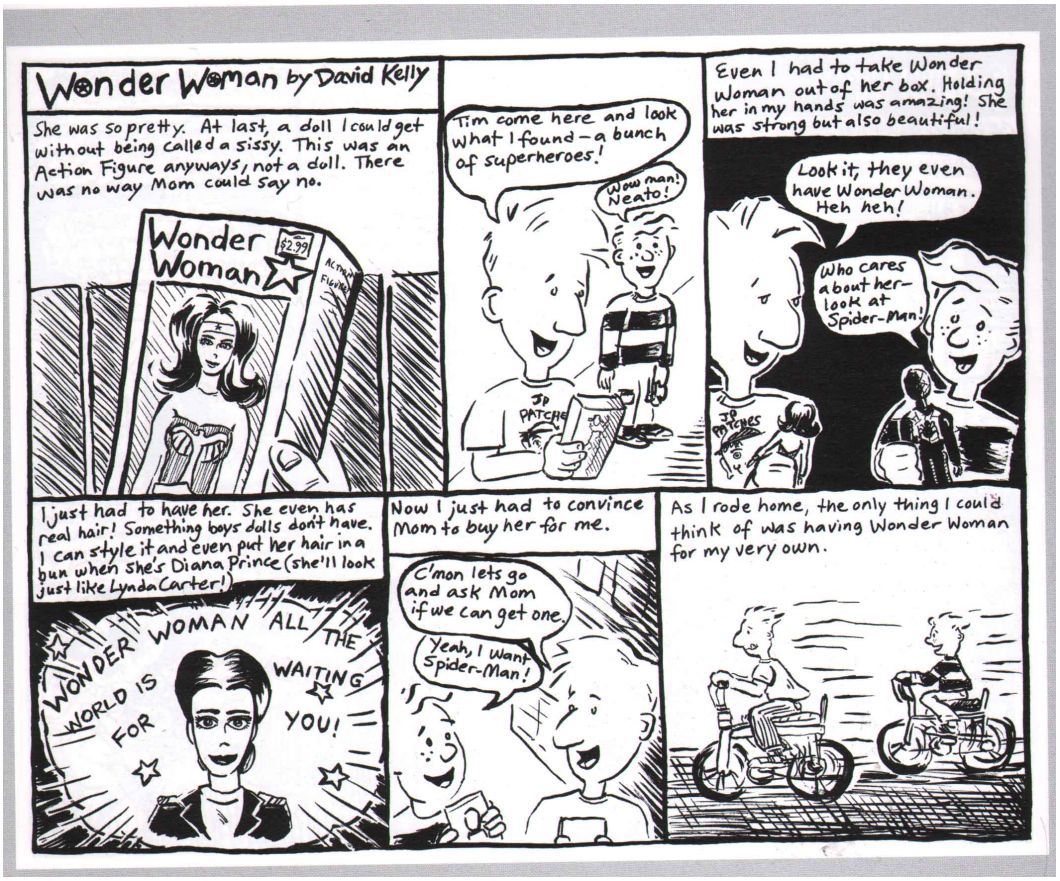

Fig. 7-20 – David Kelly, "Wonder Woman." *RDR*, 9.

Steven is relieved to have found a doll he can get "without being called a sissy" since strictly speaking this is "an Action Figure anyways." While Steven's brother Tim – exhibiting more normative gendered interests – finds Wonder Woman boring, Steven is enraptured by the female action figure and fascinated by the fact that unlike the male dolls, Wonder Woman has real hair which Steven will be able to style; the panel depicts the doll in her disguise as "Diana Prince", surrounded by swirling stars and lyrics from the 1970s Wonder Woman TV show theme tune. Here Kelly points toward Steven's creativity and pleasure in play, dressing-up and gender masquerade, characteristics that Ken Corbett sees as typical of homosexual boyhood.

Two instalments, "Fred Meyer" and "The Decision" (**Figs. 7-21** and **7-22**) show Steven's mother taking him and his sister and younger brother to the toy-store to buy one action figure each, but this experience fills Steven with shame and anxiety: "How could I pick the one I really wanted without being called a pansy?" At roughly 10 years old, Steven is already aware that his interests are

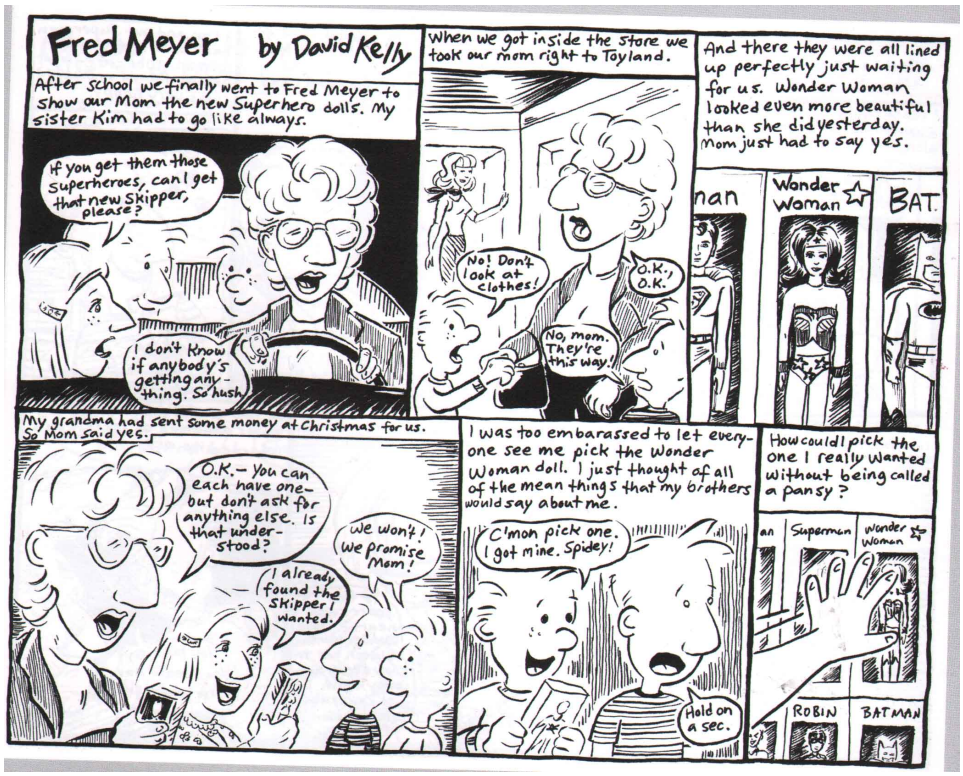

Fig. 7-21 – David Kelly, "Fred Meyer." *RDR*, 11.

non-gender-normative; almost cowed into choosing the Superman figure, Steven ultimately goes back for the toy he really wants.

Steven is elated – panel 3 of "The Decision" shows him smiling broadly clutching the Wonder Woman doll, hearts above his head indicating his love for it, but his joy crumbles as the over-friendly cashier embarrasses him, announcing "to the whole world that I picked out Wonder Woman." The last panel of "The Decision" shows Steven and his younger brother together in the back seat of

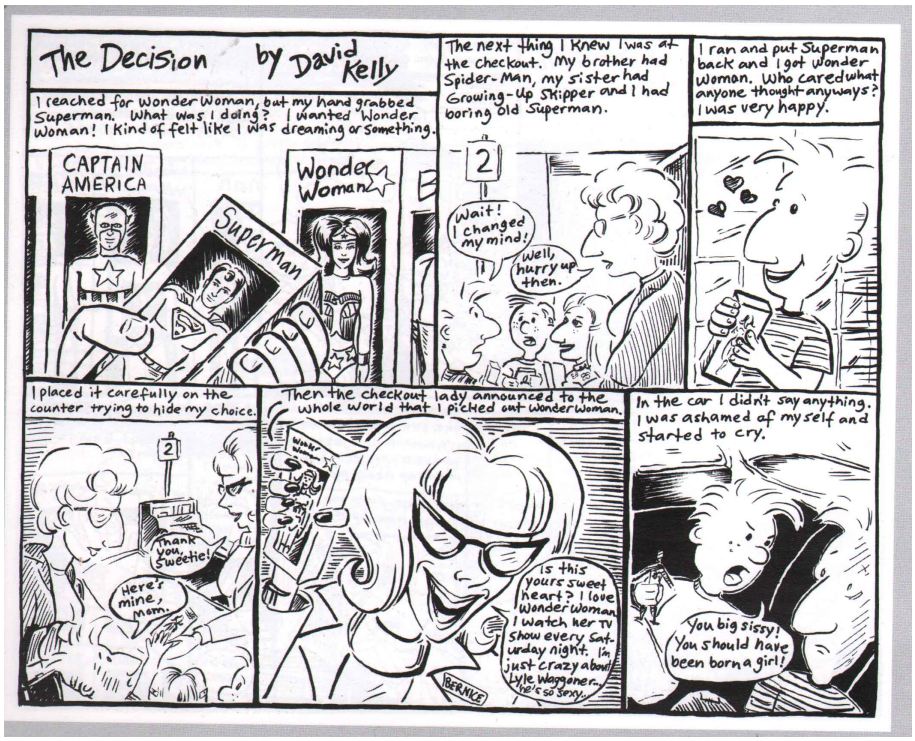

Fig. 7-22 – David Kelly, "The Decision." *RDR*, 12.

their mother's car. Steven stares straight ahead almost expressionless, his head surrounded by darkness – ostensibly the black of the back seat of the car, but taking on a symbolic, oppressive weight; his brother Tim turns to him spitefully: "You big sissy! You should have been born a girl!" Steven's narrative caption confides: "I was ashamed of myself and started to cry." As discussed in Chapter Six, Sedgwick sees such shame as constitutive of identity.

Tim's teasing continues in the next instalment, provoking Steven to throw his doll across the room in anger: "I didn't even want that dumb Wonder Woman!" The following episode, "The Rescue of Wonder Woman," reveals that Steven's mother has confiscated the doll. A now-contrite Tim accompanies

Steven in searching for the doll, which they find in their mother's closet; however the doll's leg was broken when she hit the wall and will "never be the same again." Steven tapes up the doll's wounded leg; he is shown later playing with her and with his sister's Barbie.

"The Rescue of Wonder Woman" ends on a more hopeful note; Steven and Tim encounter a new Catwoman doll, and both of them admit that they want her. However, the embarrassment and shame Steven experiences around his desire for a "feminine" toy – and the damage done to the doll itself - shows us, in Piontek's words, "the psychic pain created when medical and cultural discourses restrain gender as an either/or binary"[866] that equates conformity with healthy normality and difference with deviance.

In Judith Butler's terms, Steven is a failed performative. For Butler, gender is constituted in and through a "*stylized repetition of acts*" such as the "mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."[867] Gender is tenuous because it is not the expression of a seamless internal identity but rather is "structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this ground."[868]

Steven fails to adequately perform the speech and body acts that define him as "properly" masculine. Throughout the series, Steven's gender-nonconformity manifests in his interests in stereotypically feminine pastimes such as playing with dolls and make up; in fantasy sequences he occasionally wears dresses and feminine apparel, enacting – at least imaginatively – what Butler describes as "the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of . . . compulsory heterosexuality."[869]

Steven's fascination with the feminine does not amount to the kind of gender dysphoria associated with GID: his fantasies of cross-dressing do not

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[866] Piontek, *Queering,* 65
[867] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.
[868] Ibid. 179.
[869] Ibid., 180.

"involve a denial of his masculinity or express his desire to be female."[870] In one story "Friday Afternoon Fever" (**Fig. 7-23**) Steven attends a dance organized for children attending a summer camp. Awkward at first, Steven starts to enjoy dancing to his favourite songs, imagining himself both as John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* and as a feminine figure inspired by

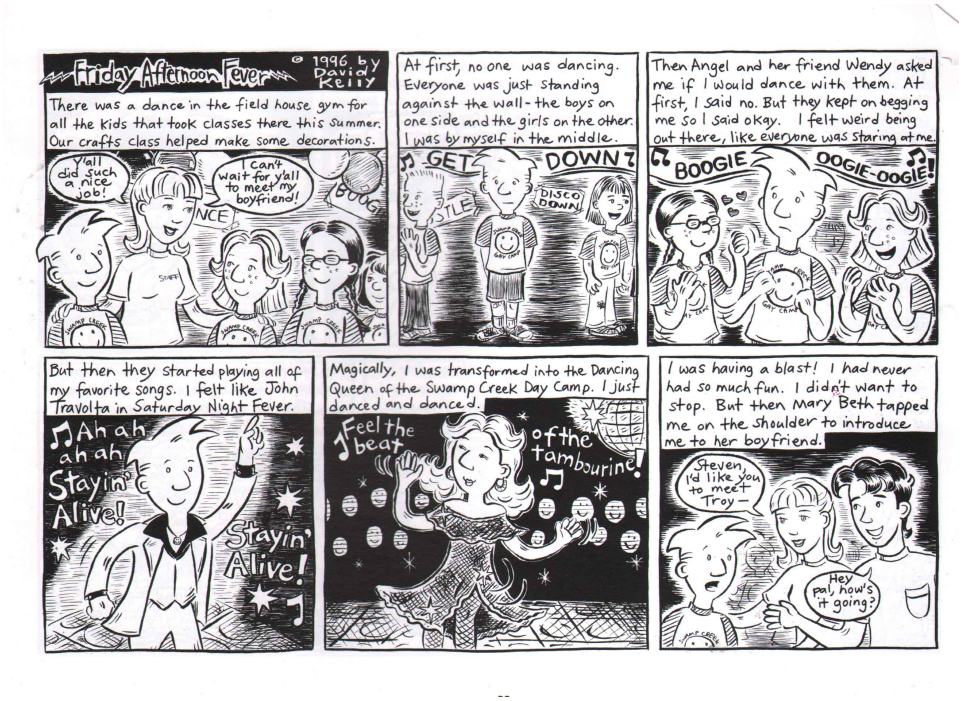

Fig. 7-23 – David Kelly, "Friday Afternoon Fever." *RDR*, 89.

Abba, "the Dancing Queen." In another story, "Square Dance" (**Fig. 7-24**), while dancing with Christopher Kanakis, a boy he has a crush on, Steven imagines Christopher in a tuxedo and himself wearing an elegant ballgown and pearls, but clearly still a boy, with no wig or make up: "I felt like I was in an old movie," he says, "dancing on a cloud."

In these scenes, Kelly portrays Steven's (imagined) subversive performances of gender and sexuality, as well as the experience that New York psychotherapist Ken Corbett sees as characteristic of "homosexual boyhood" in his essay "Homosexual Boyhood: Notes on Girlyboys." As Corbett argues, in psychological literature the existence of homosexual boys has tended to be

[870] Piontek, *Queering,* 62.

stigmatized or silenced. "Bullies identify sissies,"[871] writes Corbett, an experience depicted metaphorically in Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny*, and more directly in David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*.

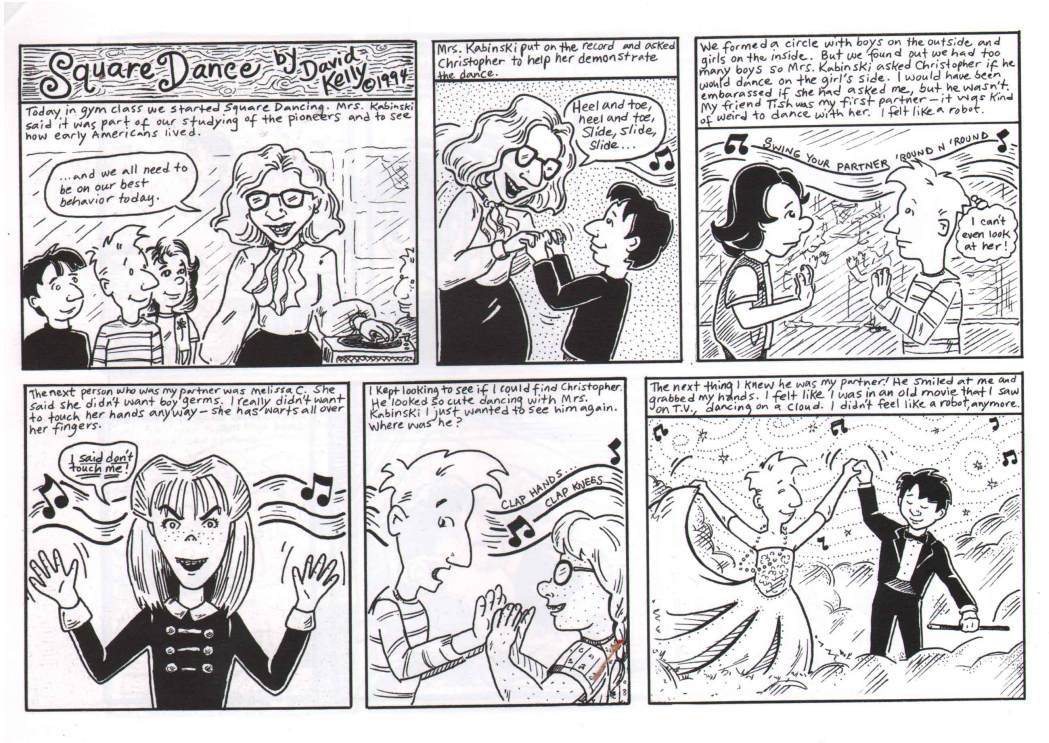

Fig. 7-24 – David Kelly, "Square Dance." *RDR*, 20.

However, as Corbett points out, psychiatrists *also* engage in a kind of bullying, in their identification of "sissy-boy syndromes" and their failure

> to speak of the boyhood experience of homosexuals other than to characterize their youth as a disordered . . . realm from which it is hoped they will break free.[872]

Corbett posits the term "girlyboy" as a way of parodically reclaiming oppressive signifiers and exploring homosexual boyhood in a non-pathologizing framework. The "oxymoronic coupling of girl and boy" in this term suggests

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[871] Ken Corbett, "Homosexual Boyhood: Notes on Girlyboys", in *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood*, ed. Matthew Rottnek (New York: New York University Press,1999), p108.
[872] Ibid.

"the possibility that there may be forms of gender within homosexuality that contradict and move beyond conventional categories of masculinity and femininity"[873] – a notion that chimes with Butler's desire for "gender configurations outside the restricting frames"[874] of heteronormativity.

Corbett rejects the term "sissy" for what he sees as it negative connotations but Piontek argues that "sissy" and "sissy boy" can indeed "be reclaimed in much the same way", leaving intact their negative connotations but simultaneously giving them "implications of strength, resistance, action, and intervention."[875] It is in this sense Piontek uses the terms "sissy" and "sissy boy", and I follow him in this usage.

Steven's Comics are often full of sad and painful moments, echoing both queer theory's long-standing emphasis on more negative emotions such as shame, and the shy and shameful feelings experienced by Drew in Robert Kirby's *Curbside*, and Byron and Oisin in Jon Macy's *Fearful Hunter*. Kelly's comics are certainly "archives" of such painful feelings in Cvetkovich's sense. As previously discussed, Sedgwick sees the emotion of shame as constitutive of identity. However, we might also see in Steven's imagined and playful "sissy boy" performances what Sedgwick describes as a "reparative impulse," which she characterizes as "additive and accretive."[876] Sedgwick draws on Melanie Klein's concept of positions – the schizoid/paranoid position and the depressive position – to discuss "paranoid and reparative . . . practices."[877]

As Sedgwick explains, for Klein's infant or adult, the paranoid position is "marked by hatred, envy and anxiety" – indeed many of the emotions Steven experiences – as it is "a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects" that surround one.[878] The depressive position, also called the reparative position, is "an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting", a position from which it is possible "to use one's own

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[873] Ibid., 109-110.
[874] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 180.
[875] Piontek, *Queering,* 110, n. 43.
[876] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.
[877] Ibid., 128.
[878] Ibid.

resources to assemble or repair the murderous part-objects into something like a whole" – though, Sedgwick emphasizes, "*not necessarily like any preexisting whole*."[879]

This "more satisfying object" is available both for identification "and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn."[880] The reparative position fears, reasonably, "that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture."[881] Certainly, the rigidly gendered and heteronormative culture surrounding Steven is shown to be unable to nurture him and support his growing identity. As a reaction to this the reparative impulse desires to "assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer[882]" for its nurture. Sedgwick suggests that camp performance can be seen as "the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety or reparative practices".[883] Steven's campy performances, though not exactly communal as they are largely imaginary, nevertheless engage with popular culture and gender stereotypes – movie stars and superheroines – investing them with personal meaning for Steven, providing ways to strengthen and nurture himself.

Steven is a "sissy boy" and also a proto-gay child who has crushes on his male schoolmates and older boys, becoming more or less aware of these feelings when a new student, Christopher Kanakis, joins his class. Christopher is "Other" – from a Greek family – and Steven is fascinated with him, as shown in the episode titled "Christopher" (**Fig. 7-25**). Steven is drawn to this stranger: "I like having Christopher sit next to me" he confides in one strip. Though a lot of girls like Christopher and follow him around, Christopher seems to prefer spending time with Steven, and despite his friends' protestations, Steven feels like "I wanted to be with Christopher by myself." Christopher tells Steven he is going to draw a picture of Darth Vader but surprises Steven: The picture Christopher has drawn is a portrait of Steven himself.

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[879] Ibid.
[880] Ibid.
[881] Ibid., 149.
[882] Ibid.
[883] Ibid., 150.

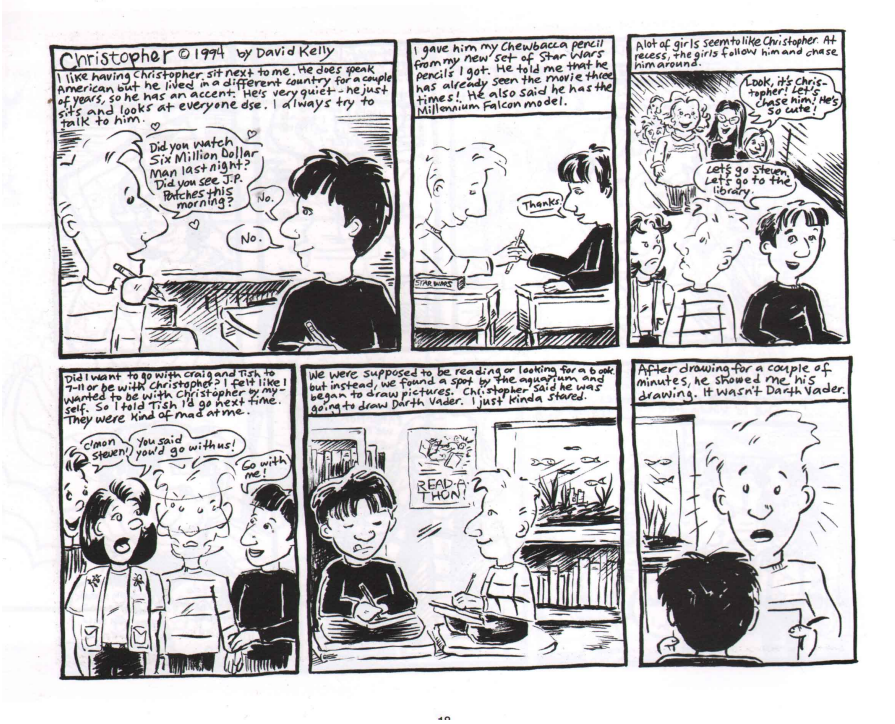

Fig. 7-25 – David Kelly, "Christopher." *RDR*, 81.

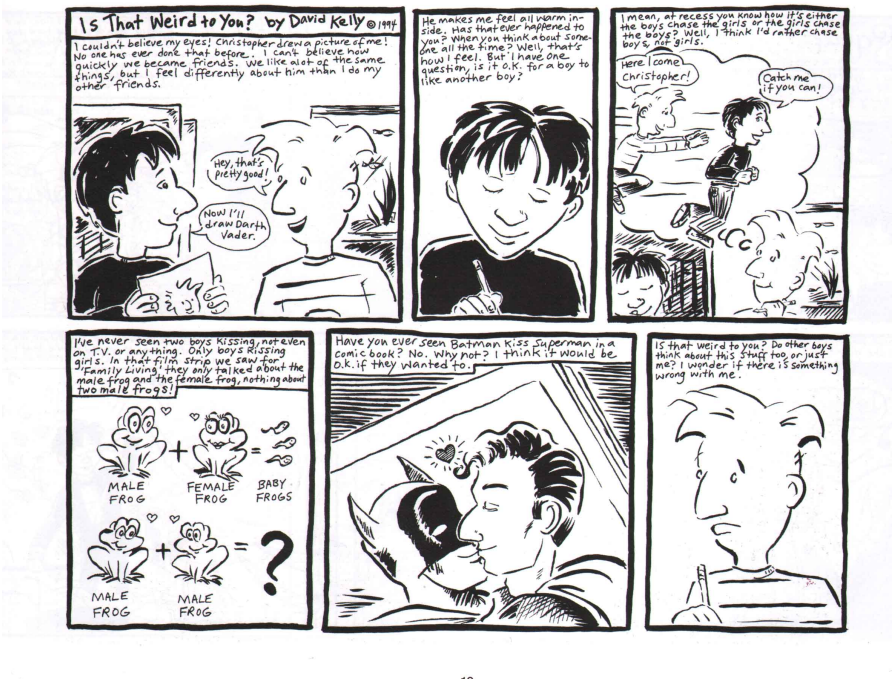

Fig. 7-26 – David Kelly, "Is That Weird to You?" *RDR,* 19.

In a strip titled "Is That Weird to You?" (**Fig. 26**). Steven confides that Christopher "makes me feel all warm inside. Has that ever happened to you?" he asks the reader, "When you think about someone all the time?" Steven is

anxious about his feelings: “I have one question” states his narrative caption, “Is it OK for a boy to like another boy?” The next panel shows Steven daydreaming about playing kiss-chase with Christopher. “I think I’d rather chase boys, not girls,” confides Steven to the reader.

In the fourth panel, Steven talks about how he has never seen two boys kissing, “not even on TV”, and how any discussion of this has been absent at school. The fourth panel represents two “equations”, depicted with crude drawings of frogs rather than with numbers. A male frog is shown, then a plus symbol, a female frog (with long eyelashes), an “equals” symbol and then a swarm of tadpoles. In the heteronormative context surrounding Steven, heterosexuality seems straightforward, logical, with a clear endpoint (reproduction). The panel also shows two male frogs with a plus symbol between them – but a question mark after their equal symbol. Indeed a question mark hangs over Steven’s desires – is being with another boy possible, even imaginable?

Steven certainly can and does imagine it; the fifth panel shows a drawing of Batman and Superman kissing, implicitly a drawing Steven himself has created, within the comic strip’s narrative (indeed, all of the *Steven’s Comics* strips can be seen as comic strips created by Steven himself, as the narrative captions are in Steven’s “voice” and there is little difference between the way Steven himself is drawn and the style in which he is shown to draw within the comic strips). Although the caption above states that he has never seen this happen in a comic book Steven nevertheless questions the rightness of this exclusion: “I think it would be OK if they wanted to.”

However, Steven’s questioning of compulsory heterosexuality is still plagued by doubts, pointing to the power of norms in making those who do not conform feel abnormal. The last panel of the strip shows Steven’s face looking anxious, his schematically drawn eyes and eyebrows communicating this emotion subtly; in the caption above Steven asks the reader plaintively “Is that weird to you? . . . I wonder if there is something wrong with me.”

The privileging of heterosexuality that causes Steven such uncertainty and emotional turmoil has been theorized from various theoretical and political

positions as "compulsory heterosexuality", the "heterosexual matrix", and "heteronormativity." As Jeffrey Weeks puts it,

> Sexuality is in complex, but inextricable, ways locked into the structuring of gender, and both are locked together by the heterosexual norm. The binary divides between masculinity and femininity, and between heterosexuality and homosexuality . . . still positions sexual subjects, and organize sexual desire, in ways which subordinate women and marginalize the transgressor.[884]

The privileging of heterosexuality means that such transgressors of gender and sexuality are forced to live, in Butler's words, "as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate."[885] Being close to Christopher does seem to assuage many of Steven's doubts; Steven experiences his own feelings for Christopher, in fact, as *more* legitimate than the feelings he is "supposed" to have towards girl. For example, in "Square Dance" (**Fig. 7-24,** briefly discussed earlier), when Steven is required to dance with girls during gym class he feels "like a robot." However because there is one girl short Christopher is asked to dance on the girls' side and when Steven ends up dancing with him he feels natural, elegant, romantic and glamorous – "I didn't feel like a robot, anymore" as he puts it; the final panel depicts Steven's fantasy, wearing a ball-gown and pearls, dancing with Christopher who is dressed in a tuxedo.

In the face of compulsory heterosexuality, Steven seems tentatively able to articulate some of his feelings and describe them not simply as shameful but also, at the same time, as sources of pleasure and joy – as able to offer him, in Sedgwick's words, "comfort and nourishment."[886] While Steven himself might experience his interest in boys as "weird" sometimes, the strips also highlight the strangeness of Steven's living situation, which does not itself match up to

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[884] Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, 3rd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 42.
[885] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 180.
[886] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

heteronormative notions of the ideal family. Stephen and his brother are constantly being moved by their divorced mother to live with grandparents or with her new boyfriend. When Stephen's mother gets together with this new boyfriend – ostensibly to give the boys a male role model and some stability – the strip questions the idealized, normative notion of the heterosexual family unit: The boys' new "father" is ill-tempered and abusive.

The boys are much happier when they are living with their grandmother in a less conventional "family", and Steven longs for a safe space in which he feels loved, protected and understood. In one episode, titled "Sleepover" (**Fig. 7-27**), Stephen spends the weekend with Christopher while Christopher's parents are away. Christopher French-kisses Donny Osmond on the television; his sister Athena's best friend Jill tells the boys about "snowballing" (spitting back and forth during a kissing session); and Christopher entertains Steven by dressing in his mother's clothes. The absence of any parental figures opens up a "temporary autonomous zone" of openness about sexual desires, and a playfulness with gender that could be defined as a "reparative practice" in Sedgwick's sense.

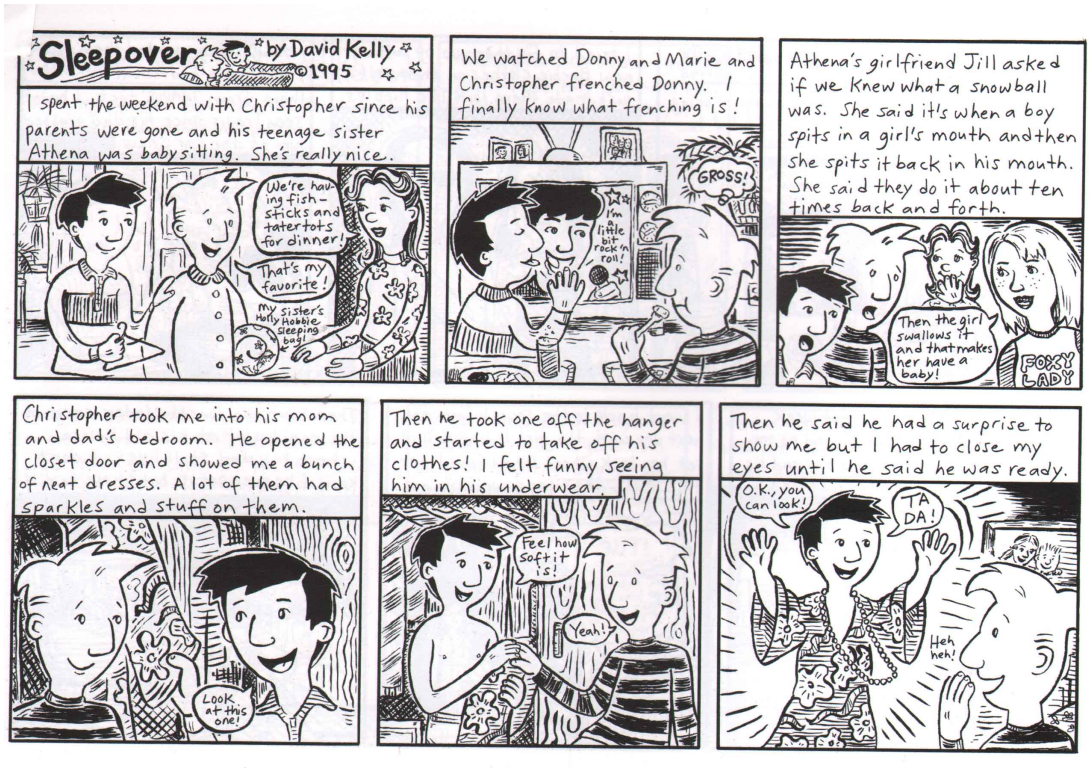

Fig. 7-27 - David Kelly, "Sleepover." *RDR,* 56.

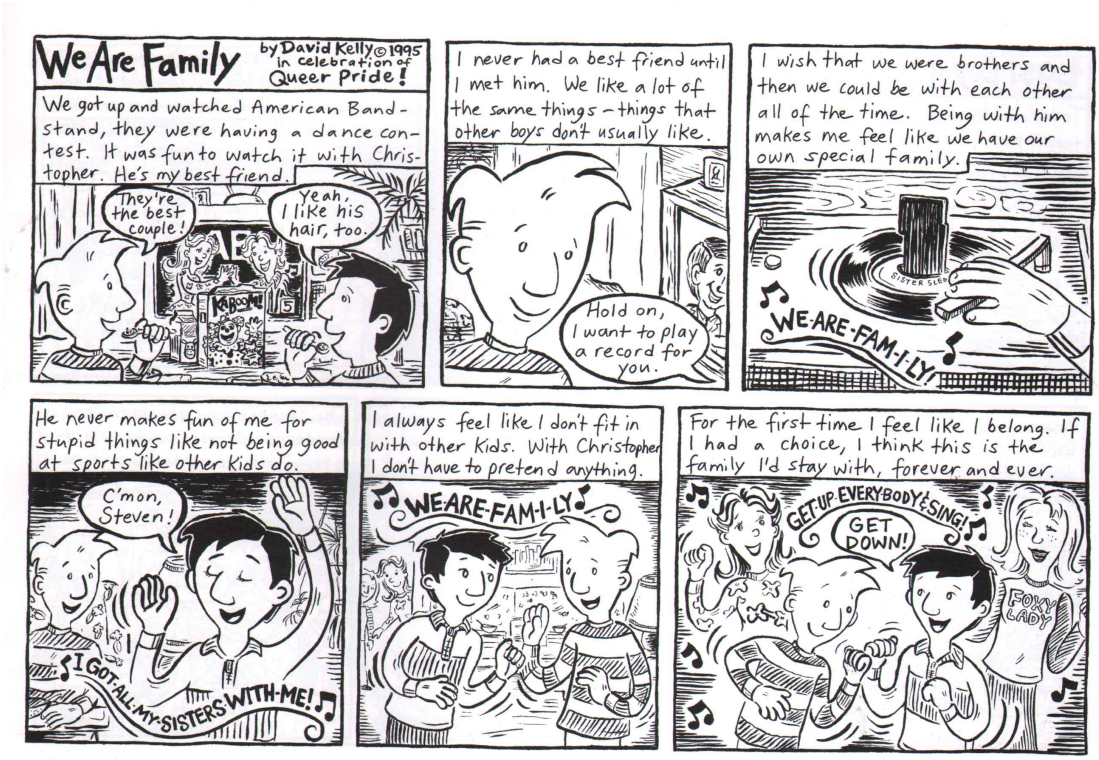

Fig. 7-28 – David Kelly, "We Are Family." *RDR*, 57.

"I never had a best friend until I met him" thinks Steven in the following episode (**Fig. 7-28**), as Christopher puts a record on the turntable for Steven – Sister Sledge's new single "We Are Family" – also the episode's title. "We like a lot of the same things," muses Steven in the episode's second panel, "Things that other boys don't usually like" – Steven's face here registers a gentle, hopeful feeling of happiness. In the third panel Christopher's hand is shown putting the needle on the record; as the music starts to play Steven's narrative caption reads: "Being with him makes me feel like we have our own special family." Christopher encourages Steven to dance along with the record, a gay anthem - though these prepubescent characters, cut off from any gay culture, are unaware of this. "I always feel like I don't fit in with other kids," thinks Steven as they dance together and are joined by Athena and Jill, "With Christopher I don't have to pretend anything."

In the last panel of the strip, Steven, Christopher, Athena and Jill dance together in the living room surrounded by musical notes: "For the first time I feel like I belong" reads Steven's thought caption, "If I had a choice, I think this is

the family I'd stay with, forever and ever." The strip suggests the importance of a sort of extended "family of choice" over and above the conventional heterosexual family; other strips, for example the ones which feature Steven's unconventional aunt coming for a visit, also challenge the heterosexual family unit.

In some ways and for a brief time, then, this family of choice does operate as a kind of community where Stephen is understood and embraced for his difference rather than for conforming to its demands; Steven's family of choice might also be seen as an example of Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of community as the ongoing *experience* of being-in-common (discussed briefly in Chapter Five), the activity of interrelation, rather than a common identity or goal.

Nancy's use of the word "community" would seem to defy our common understandings of the term. Community is usually understood as "the common", the *same*, rather than what is simply "in common"; the way the term is *traditionally* used – as in "the gay community" - implies unity, consensus and homogeneity between the constituents of a community. As Shane Phelan explains, such a vision of community "shuts us off from the instability of actually being-in-common and wraps us in common being, in sameness."[887] For Nancy community is the experience of being-in-common, of sociality and sharing, the activity of interrelation, rather than a common identity or goal. It is the creation of social ties, engagement and interaction: "If being is sharing, our sharing, then 'to be' (to exist) is to share."[888] This sharing is the basis of freedom for Nancy, rather than the autonomy and non-interference that underpins liberal humanism.

Steven's family of choice is not a community in the traditional sense but operates in a similar way to the "Private Club" in Robert Kirby's story of the same name (discussed in Chapter Five). The young faggots' "Private Club" and Steven and Christopher's celebrations are both characterised by a kind of freedom "poached" from official institutions. As Nancy might have it these small

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[887] Phelan, *Getting Specific*, 82.
[888] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 72.

gatherings are characterised by "being-in-common", by "sharing"; in Sedgwick's terms they can be understood as "reparative practices." But it must also be remembered that Nancy sees this kind of community as "a sharing which is never completed",[889] characterised by boundaries and terminations; similarly, as Sedgwick reminds us, the reparative position is achieved "only sometimes, and often only briefly".[890] This kind of community, this kind of sharing, may last only for a brief time: For Kirby's young faggots, their "Private Club" lasts only a few months, perhaps. For Steven, this sharing lasts for just a weekend spent in a loved one's home while his parents are away, perhaps even only for the duration of a cheesy disco song.

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with queer alternative comics that locate their narratives outside of any recognizable "gay community" or "gay ghetto", albeit in different ways: David Kelly's *Steven's Comics* does this because of the age of the protagonist, while Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* is set in an utterly alien, fantastical world. Setting their narratives outside of the gay community allows these cartoonists – and others like them, such as Craig Bostick, Tony Arena, Edie Fake and others discussed briefly at the start of the chapter - firstly to create comics which can ignore the conventions of both the gay ghetto and the gay porno comics genres. This then allows such artists to comment on the norms of both heterosexual, heteronormative culture, and the gay or queer community, in a variety of ways.

In *Steven's Comics* there is no gay or queer community in sight, and certainly no explicit representations of sex. However, Steven's status as an effeminate gay boy highlights questions around the emphasis on masculinity in the dominant gay habitus, and calls attention to way that the gay movement and gay theory have in Thomas Piontek's words "betrayed the sissy boy." Despite the doubt and suffering Steven goes through, his moments of self-awareness

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[889] Linnell Secomb, "Fractured Community", *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 2, Spring 2000, 141.
[890] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

and courage suggest that feminine gay boys – and the gay men they grow into (feminine or not) - need not be seen as weak, ineffectual or shameful but can exercise a degree of agency, and resist the gendered norms of both heterosexual and gay male culture.

In *Fox Bunny Funny*, setting a "coming out story" of sorts – a story concerned with transgressive desires - in a completely alien realm allows Hartzell to flout more conventional representations of gay identity, community, and sex, and create instead a complex, multi-layered metaphor for binary constructions of identity, whether around gender, sexuality, ethnicity or religion. The fox/bunny realm that the protagonist travels to at the end of the book, and his transformation from fox into bunny, raises questions about freedom and bondage, conformity and liberation – again, both within heteronormative culture and the gay, or queer, community.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This thesis has addressed and aimed to provide answers to the following questions: How is the history of American gay male comics related to social and political changes in American gay culture? What are the dominant genres within American gay male comics, and what are their conventions and characteristics? How is the subfield of queer alternative comics demarcated? Why did these comics begin to appear in the 1990s? What relationship do they have to queer culture, politics and history? How are the 1990s wave of queer alternative comics different from the LGBT comics that came before them? How do they respond to the conventions of the earlier gay male comics, to what extent do they reproduce these conventions, and to what extent can they be said to subvert them?

This thesis has demonstrated that the field of American LGBT comics is intertwined with shifts and changes in American gay social, political and cultural life. I have historicized the production of LGBT comics, breaking it down into successive "waves," and I have shown how these "waves" of production are situated in specific historical and cultural contexts. I have demonstrated that there are strong links between the representations found in the comics and the ways in which gay or queer identities were conceptualized in different periods, and have shown that important events such as Stonewall and the AIDS crisis, and political movements and moments such as Gay Liberation and the emergence of "queer," have had an impact on the kinds of stories being told in comics, as well as the forms of comics available to tell them in.

For example, as discussed in Chapter Three, the rise of the Gay Liberation movement and the creation of a commercial gay urban community in various American cities – most prominently New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles – also meant the inauguration of several gay newspapers and magazines. Many of these newspapers and magazines – both the erotic and the more community-oriented ones – ran the gay comic strips and cartoons associated with the "First Wave." Many of these comics tended to tell stories set amidst the gay urban ghetto, or were devoted to gay male pornographic

narratives. These kinds of narratives quickly became codified, as two dominant genres came to prominence within American gay male comics, and I have named these genres "gay porno" and "gay ghetto" comics. Chapter Four maps the conventions and characteristics of these genres and argues that, in telling these kinds of stories, such comics were dedicated to shaping and consolidating a sense of shared gay male identity, and contributed to the construction of a dominant gay male habitus that was both sexual and social. A central argument of this thesis has been that, while gay male comics have been treated as if they were homogenous and "all the same" in most of the (very few) extant articles on gay comics history, in fact, this is not the case. In the 1990s, a subset of gay male comics emerged, which I term queer male alternative comics.

In Chapter One, I defined my terms, arguing that this cluster of comics was distinctive, and "alternative," partly because of their means of production, and partly in terms of style, subject matter, themes, and concerns. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven explored the work of a variety of these queer male alternative cartoonists, particularly focusing on four of these artists in depth: Robert Kirby in Chapter Five, Jon Macy in Chapter Six, and Andy Hartzell and David Kelly, respectively, in Chapter Seven. These cartoonists emerged throughout the 1990s for a number of reasons, as the result of the convergence of a number of different factors: the emergence of queer punk subcultures such as queercore in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the associated "queer zine explosion"; the simultaneous rise of "general" independent or alternative comics publishing in the 1980s and 1990s; the inauguration of a more confrontational, radical queer politics; and the emergence of the gay market, with gay and lesbian consumers being aggressively targeted both by "heterosexual" and gay and lesbian producers and advertisers.

The "in-your-face" queer activism of the 1990s took a radical, anti-assimilationist stance. It overlapped with attitudes within queer punk subcultures, which took a similarly antagonistic stance towards both homophobic heterosexual attitudes *and* normative notions of gay identity from within gay culture. Queer punk subcultures such as queercore were often harshly critical of the older generation of gay men and lesbians as politically conservative, as well as questioning and challenging dominant gay tastes and

cultural practices – the dominant gay habitus. The emerging gay market – with its consumer products and glossy gay lifestyle magazines – provided a point of reference for the producers of queer zines to position themselves against. The self-published zines produced from within queer punk and activist cultures constituted less "official," less commercial forms of communication, in contrast with the glossy magazines of the established gay media.

The DIY, "edgy," cut-and-paste aesthetic of post-punk fanzines provided alternative and more easily accessible venues for the younger generation of queer cartoonists – the Second Wave – to disseminate their work. The rise of alternative comics publishers such as Fantagraphics also provided new venues for the publication of queer-themed comics. Publishers like Fantagraphics, Drawn & Quarterly and others also helped to cultivate a sense of "alternative comics" as a sensibility or a movement in its own right. They were concerned with encouraging comics artists and writers to see themselves as "auteurs," following their own personal concerns and passions rather than bowing to commercial pressures or considerations.

This thesis has demonstrated that the queer alternative comics emerging in the 1990s were different from the gay male comics that came before them. The gay male comics of the First Wave – especially those published in the gay press - were concerned with constructing and consolidating a sense of gay identity and community as relatively unified and stable. This is not to argue that the First Wave cartoonists were uniform or entirely uncritical in their representations of gay culture. During the 1980s, Howard Cruse and other contributors to the anthology *Gay Comix* did explore more difficult subjects that divided the lesbian/gay community. Indeed, some of these older artists are cited as influences by Second Wave cartoonists. Nevertheless, even when they are critical of elements of gay culture, as a whole the First Wave cartoonists ultimately affirm the ideal of a unified gay culture and community.

In contrast, the queer male alternative comics that emerged as part of the Second Wave – while critical of homophobia and heteronormativity – were far more concerned with questioning and challenging the normative, dominant values of mainstream gay culture, and critiquing the identities, tastes and practices associated with the dominant gay habitus. The vast majority of these

comics did not entirely abandon the conventions of the dominant genres of the gay comics field – gay porno and gay ghetto. Instead, the alternative queer male comics were more often likely to take up some of these genre conventions and subvert them in more subtle ways. So, as discussed in Chapter Five, cartoonists like Rob Kirby took up elements of the gay ghetto comic – focusing for example on the lives and relationships of a group of gay friends – but took a rather different attitude to the representation of the dominant gay habitus, being overtly critical of gay male consumerism, beauty ideals, and body fascism, and constructing an alternative gay habitus with references to queer subcultural art and music. As I explore in Chapter Six, artists like Jon Macy responded to gay porno genre conventions by creating pornographic stories that include explicit sex but also present more fully-rounded, emotionally complex characters, as well as challenging more normative representations of the gay male body with representations of hybrid bodies that trouble binary constructions such as masculine/feminine, human/animal, and civilized/uncivilized. As discussed in Chapter Seven, some cartoonists did entirely abandon the conventions of the dominant genres, however, eschewing representations of the gay ghetto and of gay sex by focusing on characters that are "outside" the ghetto by virtue of age (as in David Kelly's *Steven's Comics*) or by setting their narratives in almost entirely alien realms (as in Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny*).

I will now turn to a discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications this thesis has for the scholarly fields of lesbian/gay cultural history, queer theory, and comics studies. I will then go on to discuss the avenues for further research this thesis opens up.

Theoretical and Methodological Implications

My research is the most thorough and detailed history and analysis of gay male comics, and queer male alternative comics, undertaken within an academic context. Other than occasional, passing mentions in a small number of gay and lesbian cultural histories, and a handful of fan-oriented articles largely published in comics anthologies, the field of gay and/or queer male comics has largely been neglected and ignored by scholars and critics working in both

lesbian and gay studies and the emerging field of comics studies. This disregard has prevented any sustained examination of any of the key texts of the fields of gay and/or queer male comics, and any exploration of their dominant themes and concerns, or the connections between them. The main contribution of this thesis, then, has been to correct this omission: to present a detailed history of the field of gay male comics as a whole, identifying significant waves of activity and showing how they existed within specific cultural and historical circumstances; to map the characteristics and conventions of its dominant genres; to demarcate a subfield – alternative queer male comics – within this broader field; and to explore the ways in which significant creators working in this subfield responded to the broader field's dominant genre conventions. This thesis has focused attention on the work of a number of queer male comics creators – most significantly Robert Kirby, Jon Macy, Andy Hartzell, and David Kelly – in order to explore their importance and complexity, and their significant contributions to the historical lineage of "alternative" or "independent" LGBT cultural production.

I have presented a more thorough and nuanced history of gay and queer male comics than has hitherto been written. I have used Bourdieu's field theory to map the subfield of alternative queer male comics and I have positioned this field in relation to the wider field of gay male comics production. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural fields, I have shown that LGBT comics can be seen as a specific field of production, with both heteronomous (that is, more commercial) and autonomous (or independent) poles. It may be tempting for critics to classify all LGBT comics produced by LGBT artists as "alternative" or "resistant" because of the fact of their existence in a heterocentric and homophobic culture. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter One, this is the approach taken by Edward Sewell Jr. in his essay "Queer Characters in Comic Strips," one of the few academic essays on the subject. However, I argue that in fact there is a "gay mainstream," or what I have called, again drawing on Bourdieu, a "dominant gay habitus." The comics I focus on in Chapters Five, Six and Seven of this study tend to define themselves against this dominant gay habitus as much as they do against "heterosexual" mainstream culture.

At the same time I have questioned those discourses that conceptualize a monolithically resistant, authentic queer underground versus an equally monolithically conformist, inauthentic gay mainstream (although at times this is how some of the characters in the comics might talk about queer and/or gay culture). Looking at LGBT comics in terms of the idea of fields of cultural production with more heteronomous and more autonomous poles is potentially useful for looking at other fields of LGBT cultural production including – but not limited to – popular novels, films and TV shows, music, and the production of queer clubs and festivals. Bourdieu's notion of fields has been helpful in getting beyond binary thinking in this regard. Some cartoonists might engage with more heteronomous or more autonomous modes of publishing depending on the specific project, and some comics or anthologies might move from autonomous to heteronomous modes and vice versa (with all their attendant benefits and frustrations).

My use of Bourdieu should remind future researchers of LGBT culture to avoid making overgeneralizations about the "independent" or "resistant" nature of certain examples of queer cultural production. As with almost all fields of cultural production, discourses of "authenticity" and "selling out" do circulate within the field of LGBT comics production. These discourses are important as they serve to make certain kinds of practices more or less meaningful to producers. However, the meanings of cultural practice and production are never entirely stable or "pure" but always contextual and contingent. Seeing fields of cultural practice and production – as Bourdieu theorizes them – as dynamic and fluid, as sites of struggle over the meaning and definition of the field, should keep us alert to this. Keeping alert to this understanding of fields of cultural production will hopefully encourage future researchers to be mindful of too readily reading their own preferred meanings into cultural artefacts. As I will discuss later in this section, while I do not believe the author is the final arbiter of a given text's meaning, I nevertheless contend that interviewing cultural producers about their own experiences and intentions would also enrich and improve researchers' understanding of the social and historical context of the production of cultural texts and their meanings.

My analysis of queer comics, and my understanding of the field of LGBT comics as dynamic and fluid, points to the limits of notions of "subversion" and "the alternative." While a key theme within this thesis has been a challenge to those critics who understand "gay male comics" as a relatively homogenous and stable field of activity, I have also become mindful of the ways in which some of the older gay ghetto and gay porno comics in fact can be seen to challenge the conventional norms and values of gay culture in a similar way to the challenges posed by the alternative queer male cartoonists that emerged in the 1990s. As discussed in Chapter Three, the work of certain First Wave gay and lesbian cartoonists – such as Howard Cruse and Roberta Gregory – is cited as an influence by many of the Second Wave queer cartoonists such as Robert Kirby, Nick Leonard and Michael Fahy. Some of these earlier, First Wave lesbian and gay comics are highly personal, and even as they are shaped by and invested in Gay Liberationist politics and the notion of gay community, they are not unquestioning and also do present critiques of what they see as more negative elements of gay culture.

My analysis of queer alternative comics also shows the limits of "the subversive" and "the alternative" by demonstrating how difficult it is for creators working within a medium so dominated by certain genres and their conventions to break away completely from generic tropes. I have sketched the conventions of the generic paradigms of "gay ghetto" and "gay porno" comics in Chapter Three, and I have argued that these genres have been so pervasive since their consolidation in the 1960s and 1970s that gay or queer male cartoonists are required (consciously or not) to position themselves in relation to these genres and their conventions: either working more or less wholly within the conventions of one or the other genre, or adapting, questioning or subverting these conventions to some degree or other. Even choosing to depart completely from these genres – as I have argued David Kelly's *Steven's Comics* and Andy Hartzell's *Fox Bunny Funny* do – can only be understood in a context in which these genre conventions are dominant.

Queer theorizations of identity, sexuality and gender have provided me with an important framework for understanding many of the key issues explored within the queer alternative comics that emerged in the 1990s. In

particular, the theories of Judith Butler have proved to be especially useful to understanding the way queer identity is constructed in these comics. Many of these comics display an understanding of sexual desire and sexual identification, as well as gendered identity, as something socially and culturally constructed rather than "natural" or pre-given. This is sometimes demonstrated dramatically in these comics – for example, in many of Jon Macy's alternative gay porno comics, in which queer sex itself is represented as a magical force that causes bodies to become mutated and hybridized, with characters taking on the attributes of animals and gods, as well as changing and melding genders. At other times, an understanding of the complexity of identity and its performative nature is shown in an exploration of feelings of otherness experienced in childhood and youth. This can be seen both in David Kelly's exploration of the inner life of an effeminate, proto-gay ten-year-old boy, the eponymous hero of *Steven's Comics*, and in Andy Hartzell's portrayal of his young anthropomorphic fox protagonist in *Fox Bunny Funny*. And in the comics of Robert Kirby and other cartoonists who take up and adapt the conventions of the gay ghetto genre, too, we can witness the impact of Butler's theories which denaturalize both homosexual as well as heterosexual identities, suggesting that there is not simply one way "to be gay."

In some ways, then, queer alternative comics strongly reflect and share important themes with queer theory. However, my analysis of queer alternative comics also shows the potential for rigidity in some queer theorizations, as well as some of queer theory's blind spots, silences and omissions. Many of the queer comics I have discussed – in particular the traditional gay ghetto comics, and the alternative queer comics that take up and adapt the gay ghetto genre's conventions – are concerned with questions of gay male beauty ideals, and the feelings of alienation experienced by many gay men in relation to such ideals. The more traditional gay ghetto comics often reinforce the value of the idealized, Caucasian, youthful, slim and athletic gay male body, even as they also – wittingly or unwittingly – signal many gay men's ambivalent relationship with this ideal through the inclusion of less conventionally attractive and less confident characters. The alternative gay ghetto comics often make these less conventionally attractive characters the focus of their narratives, and deal with

issues of dominant body image ideals within gay male culture more directly and seriously. The fact that these issues recur in many of the gay and queer male comics discussed in this thesis suggests that they remain important ones in the lives of a significant number of gay, bisexual, and queer men.

As discussed in Chapter Four, scholars working within disciplines such as sociology and psychology, focusing specifically on body image dissatisfaction, have identified a gay body image ideal, as well as a social hierarchy on the basis of that ideal, in diverse gay social contexts. Gay male critics writing in the popular gay press and even in the context of gay cultural studies, have also commented on this, with Michelangelo Signorile in particular branding this body image ideal as "body fascism." However, it is interesting that gay and bisexual male critics writing under the banner of "queer theory" have tended, on the whole, to pay little attention to these issues. Those gay critics who do discuss body image ideals and dissatisfactions, and "body fascism," tend to do so in the broader context of discussions of gay male sexual behaviour – and are often branded as "sex-negative" by those critics who see themselves as "sex-positive." Moreover, they risk being subjected to personal criticism: for example, in a discussion of Michelangelo Signorile's critique of gay male beauty ideals in Paul Robinson's *Queer Wars*, Robinson suggests that despite Signorile "appear[ing] to be both fit and attractive" in the photographs on the covers of his books, "there is an element of sour grapes in [Signorile's] unremitting disapproval of the physical ideals pursued . . . by many young gay men."[891] Robinson suggests that criticisms such as Signorile's are "tinged with envy."[892] Even if this is the case, the fact is that such criticisms and discontents are voiced and discussed in various forms of gay media from populist works of gay cultural studies like Signorile's, to alternative comic strips like those discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis. This widespread discussion suggests – again – that these criticisms and concerns are pertinent to a number of gay/queer men's lives. My analysis of alternative gay ghetto comics by the likes of Robert Kirby, Michael Fahy, Nick Leonard, and many others speaks to queer theory,

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[891] Robinson, *Queer Wars*, 116.
[892] Ibid.

challenging gay and bisexual male critics who write as "queer theorists" to directly address issues of the dominant body ideals within gay culture from a wide variety of perspectives.

My analysis of queer comics also draws attention to the ways in which queer scholars also, often, seem to fall into entrenched and dogmatic positions. All of the comics I have discussed in depth display a sense of unease with the notion of "community," however that is conceptualised. David Kelly's and Andy Hartzell's comics show the painful price of the conformist demands of heteronormative communities – but they also, more indirectly, question the norms of gay and queer cultures; Robert Kirby's work often quite directly critiques the gay mainstream's demands for conformity; and Jon Macy's comics use various metaphors to present a number of damning representations of the "non-conformist conformity" of self-proclaimed transgressive, queer communities. In doing so, these comics again remind us of the limits of notions of subversion, the alternative, and the transgressive. They train our attention to how even the most seemingly open, progressive, or transgressive communities, scenes, and social, theoretical, and political movements run the risk of ossifying, and becoming rigid, dogmatic, and entrenched.

As discussed in Chapter Six, these rigid positions are prevalent in the writings of gay male critics with regard to questions of monogamy and promiscuity, and so-called "sex-negativity" versus "sex-positivity" – debates that queer critic Thomas Piontek has called the "gay male sex wars." As I have shown in my discussion of comics like Jon Macy's *Fearful Hunter*, many alternative queer comics take a much more open, complex, and less polarized view of monogamy and promiscuity than do those scholars and critics who tend to take one position or the other in these "sex wars."

Such entrenched dogmatic positions are symptomatic of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, has called paranoid readings. Such paranoid modes of criticism are characteristic of what Sedgwick describes as an increasingly commonplace "hermeneutics of

suspicion"[893] within academic studies. Sedgwick describes many queer theoretical texts as, at least in some ways, being produced from Klein's paranoid-schizoid position; paranoia has now "become less a diagnosis than a prescription"[894] for academics. Certainly the tendency to split sexual practices and attitudes into "good" and "bad" (whether from supposedly "sex-positive" or "sex-negative" viewpoints) is characteristic of analysis from a paranoid-schizoid position. Sedgwick encourages us to adopt depressive relations to texts rather than paranoid-schizoid ones, drawing on Melanie Klein's notions of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, discussed in Chapter Five and Seven. Instead of reading and practising from within a hermeneutics of suspicion, Sedgwick proposes that we "read from a reparative position."[895] Reparative reading and practice is more invested in looking at the complexity of any given situation, appreciating, and empathising. Sedgwick argues it is "[n]o less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic"[896] than a paranoid position. I see many of the comics I have discussed in depth in this thesis as being produced, in part, as reparative practices. As such, they have something to offer queer studies, to warn against the black-and-white positions that some critics writing under the rubric of "queer" end up occupying, and encouraging scholars to remain more open to ambiguity, ambivalence, and more complex views of identities, practices, and experiences.

In the spirit of holding on to a complex view of practice and identity, it has been important to this study to incorporate textual analysis of the comics themselves with insights drawn from interviews with the creators, as well as theoretical insights drawn from queer scholarship and lesbian/gay cultural history. As discussed in Chapter Two, the handful of journalistic and scholarly works on LGBT comics published thus far have tended either to present interview material "straight" as if the author is the ultimate arbiter of meaning of these texts, or conversely to apply theory to an analysis of comics with little

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[893] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.
[894] Ibid., 125.
[895] Ibid., 146.
[896] Ibid., 150.

sense of awareness of the producers' intentions, experiences, or the social and historical context of the production of these comics.

While this study presents textual analysis of a number of comics, I have also incorporated material from interviews with key queer cartoonists throughout this work so as to preserve the experiences and views of the comics creators themselves. In terms of textual analysis, I have taken up the work of critics on the formal and aesthetic qualities of comics, such as Scott McCloud, Charles Hatfield, Josef Witek and Neil Cohn to explore the impact of drawing styles (particularly the "cartoon mode" and "naturalistic mode"), panel breakdowns, and word/image tension on the way comics narratives communicate meaning. Comics studies is still a relatively new area of scholarship; historically it has varied from antagonistic analyses which have viewed comics as morally or ideologically dangerous, to what Josef Witek describes as the "relatively naïve social analysis of the reflection-theory school."[897] More recently work has emerged that trains our attention to the formal qualities of comics, but I would like to argue, with Witek, that simply replacing the earlier, inadequate analytic approaches with "a celebratory and insular formalism"[898] would do little to improve our understanding of comics. Witek argues that it is possible now "to use the conceptual tools at hand to examine the connections between the specific textual attributes of comics and the social, economic, and ideological matrices in which they are enmeshed."[899] Writing about queer subcultures more specifically, Judith Halberstam has argued that any contribution to creating an archive of queer subcultures would ideally preserve, not only temporary artefacts such as publications, but also interviews that reveal "the self-understandings of cultural producers."[900] By bringing textual analysis together with theories drawn from queer scholarship and lesbian and gay cultural history, and incorporating the self-understandings of comics producers, I have been able to paint a more detailed and nuanced picture of the producers of queer comics than what has gone before.

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[897] Witek, "Comics Criticism," 15.
[898] Ibid.
[899] Ibid.
[900] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 169.

Future Research

Although this thesis presents, in Chapter Three, a history of LGBT comics, it has primarily dealt with the gay and queer *male* comics. As noted in the Introduction, a more in-depth history of lesbian comics and cartoons remains to be written. There have been a handful of academic essays on queer female cartoonists, mainly focusing on Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Fun Home*, Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, and Ariel Schrag's autobiographical works.[901] But a more complete, in-depth history of this rich area of the field merits separate research. The work of more well-known lesbian cartoonists such as Bechdel, DiMassa, and Schrag, as well as lesser-known but nevertheless prolific and important cartoonists, such as Jennifer Camper, Leanne Franson, and Carrie McNinch, and many others, is deserving of more detailed critical attention.

In recent years, more bisexual female and male cartoonists have been producing work that directly addresses bisexuality. As noted in Chapter Two, Northwest Press has recently published a collection titled *Anything That Loves: Comics Beyond "Gay" and "Straight,"* devoted to both more established cartoonists and newcomers creating comics about bisexual identities and experiences. A collection like *Anything That Loves* would be a good starting point for any researcher interested in exploring bisexual representations in alternative comics. Transgender issues have also started to be explored by both trans cartoonists and cisgender cartoonists. Indeed, a more complete history of LGBT comics as a whole awaits to be written, though this was beyond the scope of the current project, and more in-depth research could be undertaken on the specific work of various lesbian, bisexual, or transgender cartoonists.

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[901] See Gabrielle N. Dean, "The 'Phallacies' of Dyke Comic Strips," in *The Gay '90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formations in Queer Studies*, ed. Thomas Foster, et al. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 199-233; Ann Cvetkovich "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's Fun Home," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1 & 2 (2008), 111-128; Adrienne Shaw, "Women on Women: Lesbian Identity, Lesbian Community, and Lesbian Comics," in *Lesbian Images in International Popular Culture*, ed. Sara E. Cooper (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 84-93.

LGBT-themed comics by queer people of colour is another potentially fruitful area of research, as well as representations of queer people of colour in comics by both white queer cartoonists and cartoonists of colour. Many LGBT cartoonists have included non-white characters in their narratives and some have focused exclusively or almost exclusively on non-white characters – for example, Jaime Cortez (*A La Brava* and *Sexile*), Victor Hodge (*Black Gay Boy Fantasy*), and Belasco (*Brothers of New Essex*). The ways in which these various cartoonists deal differently with the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, as well as class, would prove a very fruitful area of research.

Autobiography (and biography) plays an important role in a number of queer comics. Although autobiographical comics have not been the focus of this thesis, throughout this study I have touched on the importance of the personal to the queer comics narratives I have discussed. More investigation could be undertaken into why autobiographical and personal elements play a strong role in queer comics, and what kind of implications this has. If, as I am arguing, comics creators position themselves in relation to the dominant gay porno and gay ghetto genres – responding to them by either choosing to work within them, adapting or subverting them, or seeking to evade them altogether – how does the more strongly autobiographical work being done effect our understanding of these genres? Can autobiographical comics that deal with queer lives be understood as adapting "gay ghetto" or "gay porno" genres, or do they then become something altogether different? How do they relate to the plethora of autobiographical comics done under the general banner of alternative comics by non-LGBT creators? Do they share more common ground with general ("heterosexual") alternative comics than with gay ghetto or gay porno comics? Is it possible to map the conventions and characteristics of autobiographical LGBT or queer comics?

My study has focused much more on those comics that self-consciously depart from the dominant genre conventions of gay male comics, or try to rework or subvert them. However, many comics are currently being published that are happy to work within these conventions without any desire to be "edgy" or "subversive," and these comics too are as deserving of as serious and in-depth study as the comics I have chosen to focus on. The more conventional

gay ghetto comic strips such as *Kyle's Bed and Breakfast*, *Chelsea Boys* and *Troy*, and the glossier erotic comics and illustration books published by Bruno Gmünder, for example, could be equally fruitful sources for academic study. Of course, this was not my intention for the current project, but it is certainly an avenue for further research that my work opens up. Again, there are many other examples, and gay porno comics are an obviously important but highly under-researched area of queer comics production (and cultural production more broadly). Pornographic gay male comics and illustration books are currently enjoying more popularity than ever with Taschen and Bruno Gmünder both publishing books devoted to the work of Tom of Finland and other more current erotic artists from various countries including Japan, with for example, Japanese erotic gay BDSM artist Gengoroh Tagame's graphic novels *Endless Games* and *Gunji* being published in English translations by Bruno Gmünder in 2013 and 2014 respectively.[902] Many of the erotic comics currently being published, and enjoying commercial popularity, arguably reproduce the conventions of traditional gay male porn comics while adding innovations, and might be seen to tell us more about the contemporary gay male sexual habitus, its mores and values, and therefore are worthy of further research.

This thesis has focused mainly on textual analysis, though as noted, through incorporating interview I have sought to preserve the experiences and reflections of the producers of these comics. In doing these interviews, I have noticed that my respondents repeatedly described their various works as "labours of work," and indeed the vast majority of the comics producers discussed in this thesis do not make their primary income from doing comics, and these comics are often self-published at risk of financial loss. An interesting area of further research, then, would be to investigate why queer cartoonists keep making comics, and if the rewards are not financial, then what kind of rewards are there? Bourdieu's notion of cultural and symbolic capital seems to be important here. I have discussed the way in which certain kinds of subcultural capital are displayed in the texts themselves. For example, in

[902] Gengoroh Tagame, *Endless Games* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2013); Gengoroh Tagame, *Gunji* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2014).

Chapter Five, I talk about the way Robert Kirby builds an alternative gay habitus with references to indie music and alternative culture. However, bearing in mind that cultural and symbolic capital are specific to each field and subfield, we might then ask what kinds of symbolic capital accrue to comics creators working in the field of LGBT comics production, and why? Further analysis of interview data through a Bourdieusian framework, as well as further investigation into the working lives of queer cartoonists, would help to do this.

Questions of consumption would also lend themselves to future analysis. Who reads these comics? How are these comics consumed, and where are they read? How has this changed? I have theorised that gay- and/or queer-themed comics have an effect on how gay identity, community, and sex are understood by readers. However, it would be fruitful to bring such theorizations together with empirical investigations into the readers' experiences of these texts. What kind of effects do representations of gay/queer identities in these comics have on the subjectivities of readers, and their self-understandings? Interviews and focus groups with LGBT comics readers and fans, again analysed in the light of Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus and field, would help researchers gain an understanding of the role these comics play in consumers' day-to-day experiences.

Various changes have affected the field of LGBT comics production since the early twenty-first century. One of the most important of these is the shifting availability and nature of venues for the publication of queer-themed comics work – and this has also had an impact on consumption. While in the 1980s and 1990s there were a number of anthologies dedicated to publishing queer comics work on a semi-regular basis, by the middle of the first decade of this century most of these anthologies had ceased publication. As noted in Chapter Three, *Gay Comics* suspended publication in 1998, and *Meatmen* followed suit in 2005. *Boy Trouble* was published on an irregular schedule until 2004 (though it was followed by two collections).

Another crucial factor affecting the field of LGBT comics production, of course, is the impact of the Internet. The Internet has become increasingly important for promoting LGBT cartoonists and comics in the Third Wave and beyond. Between 2002 and 2006, Tim Fish edited the online gay romance comic

anthology, *Young Bottoms in Love*, which ran for six "online" volumes at PopImage.com. The Internet has also been instrumental in connecting LGBT comics consumers and producers. In 2003, a number of comics fans and professionals from across the US formed a non-profit organization to support and promote LGBT comics, creators, and readers. The organization, named Prism, runs an expansive website and publishes the annual resource guide, *Prism Comics: Your LGBT Guide to Comics*, and is an important force for maintaining the visibility of LGBT people within the mainstream comics industry, and for promoting the work of LGBT self-publishers.

While print media has waned and many artists have turned to the internet to publish their work, at the same time queer cartoonists have continued to valorise print media, perhaps spotlighting their work online but then also collecting comic strips in photocopied zines or in more substantial, more professionally-printed collections put out by independent publishers. To cite just one example, Rick Worley serialized his surreal, semi-autobiographical strip *A Waste of Time* on a blog but then also collected strips in the form of two issues of a comic book published by Brian Andersen's independent imprint CBG Comics.[903] Other queer comics creators have done similar things. The materiality and sensuality of comic books seems to be an important part of their appeal to these creators, and to the consumers of queer comics.

Discussing feminist zine culture, Alison Piepmeier argues that while blogs and zines are similar, the materiality of the latter makes possible "intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers,"[904] laying the groundwork for "embodied communities," mobilizing "particular human experiences that are linked to the body," such as vulnerability, affection and pleasure, "leverag[ing] their materiality into a kind of surrogate physical interaction and offer[ing] mechanisms for creating meaningful relationships."[905] Further investigation of what the materiality of LGBT comics means to LGBT creators and consumers would constitute an interesting avenue for future

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[903] Rick Worley, *A Waste of Time* no. 1-2 (San Francisco, CA: CBG Comics, 2008).
[904] Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 58.
[905] Ibid., 59.

research. The founding of Northwest Press by Zan Christiansen of Prism in 2010 would seem to be a testament to the importance of this materiality. Northwest Press have published various collections by different queer creators, including, in 2011, a substantial print collection of Rick Worley's *A Waste of Time*.[906]

Concluding Remarks

In 2013, Justin Hall edited a collection of some of the best of the last sixty years' worth of LGBT comics and cartoons, accompanied by a historical essay, titled *No Straight Lines*.[907] Published by the established and highly-regarded independent comics publisher Fantagraphics, the publication of *No Straight Lines* was seen to signify that LGBT comics had now entered more general mainstream consciousness, and the hope is that with this awareness will come more public esteem for queer comics creators within the broader field of comics publishing, as well as book publishing and beyond.

In early 2014, Northwest Press published an anthology titled *QU33R*, featuring thirty-three LGBT cartoonists, and edited by Rob Kirby.[908] Kirby states in his introduction that he intends the publication to be a companion to Hall's *No Straight Lines*, but rather than a historical archive as Hall's book is, *QU33R* is intended to show the current state of LGBT comics production.

On September 13th 2014, it was announced that QU33R had won a prestigious Ignatz Award in the category of "Outstanding Anthology or Collection."[909] This is encouraging news for LGBT creators. However, despite this good news, at the time this Conclusion is being written, there is no queer-themed comics anthology coming out on a regular basis. Moreover, given the precarious nature of print media and the rise of file-sharing on the Internet, it

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[906] Rick Worley, *A Waste of Time* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2011).
[907] Justin Hall, ed., *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2012).
[908] Robert Kirby, ed., *QU33R* (Seattle, WA: Northwest Press, 2014).
[909] Rich Johnston, "The 2014 Ignatz Award Winners – A Complete Listing," *Bleeding Cool* (website), September 13th 2014, http://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/09/13/the-2014-ignatz-awards/, accessed September 15th 2014.

also seems increasingly difficult for queer cartoonists – as well as creative practitioners of all kinds, more generally – to make any kind of substantial living from their work. Nevertheless, queer cartoonists continue to make new work, sharing it on the Internet, and publishing it in printed form when funds and favourable circumstances allow, with various creators raising money via crowd-funding sites like Kickstarter to self-publish their work in print.

To continue creating queer comics in the current climate might seem naïve, futile, not pragmatic enough and far too utopian. But, as José Esteban Muñoz puts it, "shouting down utopia is an easy move."[910]In Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia*, he writes of the importance of queer world-making, which he sees as a utopian endeavour in the positive sense. "Utopia," writes Muñoz, "lets us imagine a space outside heteronormativity"[911] and more importantly, "offers us a critique of the present, of what it is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be."[912] For Muñoz, memories of queer lives and experiences – "queer utopian remembrances," as he terms them – can "help us carve out a space for actual, living sexual citizenship."[913] Memories and their ritualized retellings through writing, performance, film and video, and visual culture, have "world-making potentialities" for Muñoz. I would agree with this and add comics explicitly to this list of cultural products.

To imagine utopia is, Muñoz points out, "central to a critique of hegemony,"[914] even as the heteronormativity of the "straight world" often seeks to forbid such utopian imagining, and such queer world-making. Any kind of queer cultural production, then – including the production of queer-themed comics by queer creators, aimed at queer audiences – "is both an acknowledgement of the lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a 'world making,' in the face of that lack."[915]

Utopian practice is not only a critique but also – and here Muñoz echoes Sedgwick's work on reparative practices – "an additive or reparative gesture.

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[910] Muñoz, *Cruising*, 11.
[911] Ibid., 35.
[912] Ibid.
[913] Ibid.
[914] Ibid., 40.
[915] Ibid.

Queer utopian practice is about 'building' and 'doing' in response to that status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world."[916] Queer cartoonists continue to create and "do" queer comics, to document their experiences and explore their fantasies in cartooned queer archives, building new queer worlds that challenge the existing norms of gay culture and the heterosexual world alike.

[916] Ibid.

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Appendix

List of interviews

Arena, Tony, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 25th 2008, New York, NY.

Bostick, Craig, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording (telephone interview), March 9th 2009, Boston, MA.

Camper, Jennifer, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 30th 2008, New York, NY.

Cole, Bard, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording (telephone interview), March 8th 2009, Memphis, TN.

Cortez, Jaime, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 20th 2008, year, San Francisco, CA.

Cruse, Howard, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 27th 2008, North Adams, MA.

Davenport, Dave, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 31st 2008, Los Angeles, CA.

Denson, Abby, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 24th2008, New York, NY.

Fahy, Michael, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 21st 2008, Philadephia, PA.

Hall, Justin, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 18th 2008, San Francisco, CA.

Hartzell, Andy, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 22nd 2008, Berkeley, CA.

Hilty, Joan, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 25th 2008, New York, NY.

Hodge, Victor, interview, tape recording (telephone interview), March 11th 2009, Washington, DC.

Kelly, David, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording (telephone interview), March 5th 2009.

Kirby, Robert, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 16th2008, Minneapolis, MN.

Leonard, Nick, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 14th 2008 San Francisco, CA.

Luce, Ed, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 5th 2008, San Francisco, CA.

MacIsaac, Steve, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 31st 2008, Los Angeles, CA.

Macy, Jon, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 19th 2008, San Francisco, CA.

McNinch, Carrie, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 1st 2008, Los Angeles, CA.

Pietrowski, Tim, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 28th 2008, New York, NY.

Quispe, Carlo, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 30th 2008, New York, NY.

Rader, Brad, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 3rd 2008, Los Angeles, CA.

Roberts, Larry-bob, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 15th 2008, San Francisco, CA.

Roddy, Tommy, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 6th 2008, San Francisco, CA.

Roundy, Bill, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 28th 2008, New York, NY.

Schrag, Ariel, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 2nd 2008, Los Angeles, CA.

Sherman, BiL, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 11th 2008, Minneapolis, MN.

Triptow, Robert, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, July 17th 2008, San Francisco, CA.

Velez, Jr., Ivan, interview by S. Shamsavari, tape recording, August 23rd 2008, New York, NY.